

BY WHAT AUTHORITY?

**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
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Religious authority is the theme of both the Hebrew Bible readingⁱ and the Gospel lessonⁱⁱ this morning. The Israelites question Moses' authority as they thirst for water on the arid Sinai Peninsula, at the beginning of their forty-year trek from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land in Canaan. Moses feared that his people were actually ready to stone him to death. More than a thousand years later, the chief priests and elders of the people question Jesus' authority as he was teaching in the temple in Jerusalem: "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus doesn't answer directly, but instead challenges them to state whether or not John the Baptist acted with authority from heaven or only from his human origins. After arguing among themselves, the religious leaders answer, "We do not know." Jesus then retorts, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

How do we know whom to trust as a religious authority these days? There are certainly a lot of priests, ministers, rabbis, imams, gurus, and masters of all kinds vying for our attention and loyalty. New students arriving on the Stanford campus find more than thirty active religious groups -- twenty of them representing different strands of Christianity -- how are they to decide whom to trust? By what authority, exactly, do these religious leaders or communities teach and act?

My short answer is that of the character Siddhartha in the novel of that name by Hermann Hesse. When he meets the historical Buddha, he tells the Buddha that even

though his teachings are wonderful, they have been attained by the Buddha's own seeking in his own way, not simply by listening to the lessons of others. Siddhartha then insists that he must be his own pupil and discover spiritual truth by coming to know his own true self, albeit aided by the knowledge and experiences of other great teachers.ⁱⁱⁱ So, I would advise Stanford students, and other members of this congregation, that your spiritual journey must be uniquely your own, although you can learn a lot from trailblazers and travelling companions.

A dozen years ago I had a book published entitled, *Finding Your Religion*.^{iv} It used a Hindu metaphor of climbing the spiritual mountain. There are a number of paths that can ultimately be spiritually satisfying, although there are also plenty of dead ends at best and precipices at worst along the way. There are also different altitudes on the spiritual mountain, which correspond to different stages of faith development that we can go through as we grow older. Referencing a number of psychological studies over the last thirty years, I called these stages Magic (for pre-school aged children), Reality for school children, Dependence in early adolescence, Independence in later adolescence and early adulthood, Interdependence in middle age, and Unity in the later years. I claimed that starting with the third stage of Dependence, one could remain comfortably at a particular level on the spiritual mountain throughout one's life, depending on one's circumstances, surroundings, peer group, and teachers. I explained that the stage of Interdependence was rather difficult to attain for any of us, and Unity practically impossible, since it's the realm of religious mystics in all traditions, who are few and far between.

I encouraged readers to get off the couch and get moving on a particular spiritual path, even if they might later come to a trail crossing and find another path more personally fulfilling. You can't get anywhere without starting somewhere. And if you don't get on an established path of one of the great world religions and instead begin bushwhacking alone, you can end up going around in circles or getting sliced up in the brambles and underbrush.

O.K., some students have said to me: How – pragmatically speaking – can I pick a path to start walking on? By putting on a blindfold, spinning around, and pinning hopes on whatever direction in which I happen to stumble? Maybe, but I encourage students to take the hands of friends. Say you know a Christian who has been trying to get you to attend a Bible study, a Jew who wants to invite you to a Passover Seder, or a Buddhist who would like to teach you how to meditate. Then at least you have companionship and some degree of trust. And seeing the effects of faith in someone else may open you to try out what they do.

Another approach is simply to start with something that seems intriguing and engaging. Let your heart lead you into something that resonates deep inside you even if it's not the path you know best. There's a big caveat, though. Use your head, along with your heart – Don't abandon your common sense and your judgment, especially when it looks like an approach can be hurtful and damaging to yourself or others. Part of answering the question, "By whose authority," is staying away from paths where someone's pushing you too hard, misleading you, or causing you pain. You won't get very far this way and could end up going over one of those precipices.

We've added a note of warning in our Office for Religious Life directory that profiles the thirty plus groups that are members of Stanford Associated Religions. We point out that unfortunately not every religious group that tries to get established at Stanford has students' best interests at heart. If an organization has some or all of these five characteristics, we strongly advise avoiding them: pressure, deception, totalitarian worldview, alienation from others, and exploitation.

High-pressure recruitment tactics include not taking no for an answer, and actively pursuing students even into dorm rooms. Deception is most often of the bait-and-switch type: not being up-front about motives when first approaching a student and not identifying the religious group involved. Totalitarian worldviews are held by groups which claim to possess the truth exclusively, which criticize academic objectivity and the scientific method, and which try to be involved in all aspects of one's life, from scholarly pursuits to extracurriculars, often with many contact hours every day. Alienation refers to groups trying to separate students from their old friends and even family members who have different views. Organizations which want to choose all of one's friends are deeply manipulative and dangerous. Finally, there's exploitation: Making unrealistic demands on one's time and money. Beware if a group is asking for financial sacrifice to support them or is asking that one take time away from studies – one's first priority at Stanford -- to participate in their activities.

Embarking on a journey of genuine spiritual exploration on paths other than the one you grew up with, I've found, can have surprising consequences: many students find themselves back on their childhood path, but at a different level on the spiritual mountain. As one student in a class I taught put it, "I had come to see Judaism as an all-or-nothing

proposition. Moving back towards it was the last thing I expected when I took this class. Now I understand that even if I'm not Orthodox like my parents, I can still find a comfortable place within the Jewish tradition." Another wrote in her course journal: "Perhaps the most inspiring thing that I have gotten from the class is the idea that it is okay, even beneficial, simply to use the Christian religion that I have grown up with as a starting place. I used to think that I had to explore and understand fully all religions before embarking on my journey; now I realize that this can come as I progress spiritually."

I personally started college as a self-proclaimed atheist, having left my childhood Presbyterianism as supposedly stultifying and hypocritical. A college chaplain urged me actively to pursue the meditation practice and yoga I'd become interested in, and a summer trip to India to live with a Hindu priest ensued. By the end of college, though, I was identifying again as a Christian, as I do today, albeit out of a different institutional base than I grew up with.

I think there are a number of important modalities for exploring the spiritual mountain, and any one of them can be a starting point for someone whose having trouble getting off the couch and starting to walk. Let me tick through a few this morning.

One is through the intellectual life -- by thinking. For example, for myself reading the writings of psychologist Carl Jung was a great stimulus. Jung presents a theory of religious archetypes, which he claims are found in all people, cultures and times. He brings all the historical religions together by finding fundamental connections among them, and he moves easily between traditions in his explanations and theorizing. At the same time, you don't even have to commit to any reality beyond that of the human

psyche to engage with Jung, because he finesses the question of whether there's really a God at all. He's ambivalent about whether archetypes are merely psychological constructs within the human mind or expressions of a divine reality transcending and deep within each of us.

Another spiritual starting place or modality is sensation. American Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau saw direct personal experience of nature as the best way to wake up and come alive spiritually. Emerson writes, "The religious sentiment... is a mountain air... It makes the sky and hills sublime, and the silent song of the stars is it... Wonderful is its power to charm and to command... [Any worthwhile religion] should blend with the light of rising and setting suns, with the flying cloud, the singing bird, and the breath of flowers."^v Thoreau wrote about his two years living on Walden Pond in this way: "Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself. I have been as sincere a worshipper of Aurora as the Greeks. I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did."^{vi}

For a number of people the entree to religion is through social service and social action. This was an important part of my own movement from atheism back to Christianity during college. I was at Yale during the upheavals of the 1960's, and I found that Christian chaplains and students from the divinity school were some of the most reliably and deeply involved people in the civil rights movement and antiwar movement of the time, grounded in the imperatives of their Christian faith. The Hindu priest I lived with that summer in India was a Gandhian, and I came to learn the connection of not only

the Bhagavad-Gita but also Jesus' Sermon on the Mount to a deep commitment to nonviolent direct action for social change -- the kind that could free India from the British without war, and later be used by the Rev. Martin Luther King to free African Americans from many of the continuing legacies of slavery like segregation and Jim Crow laws.

Another way into the religious life is through spiritually derived exercises like yoga and meditation. Useful as these are to many for medical stress-reduction and health maintenance, it can eventually become clear that they're based on ancient religious principles within Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as in Western religious traditions. When that's realized, people can be drawn to pursue a deeper study of these religions' metaphysics and practices. This was true some forty years ago for Harvard Medical School Professor Herbert Benson, as he began examining a simple form of meditation which when done twenty minutes a day produced what he called the "relaxation response." It led to decrease in blood pressure for those with elevated levels, increase in alpha wave rhythms associated with feelings of well-being, and demonstrably reduced stress levels, aiding in the treatment of hypertension. As Benson delved more deeply into these medical results, he found that they were grounded in religious practices thousands of years old in all of the major traditions.^{vii} He then became religiously engaged himself, writing decades later about a faith factor and humans being wired for God in a book entitled *Timeless Healing: The Power and Biology of Belief*.^{viii}

Finally, both suffering and joy can be gateways to religious life for many people. "There are no atheists in foxholes" is a well-worn aphorism. Religious festivals and holidays, especially those involving singing, dancing and feasting, can awaken people to new levels of happiness beyond simple eating, drinking and being merry. Christmas and

Easter celebrations keep many Christians connected to the church even after their faith has frayed in other ways, and the same is true for many Jews in relation to the High Holidays in the fall, Hanukkah in the winter, and Passover in the spring. On the other hand, personal suffering from injury, disease and loss can also jolt one into a religious sensibility never even imagined when one is healthy and wealthy.

My bottom line observation after decades of university chaplaincy is that real understanding and appreciation of religion can never come from armchair observation. It can only come from the actual experience of walking a personal path within a larger religious tradition: engaging in its rituals in one's own way, singing its songs with one's own unique voice, living its ethical code according to one's own conscience, and becoming part of its community of faith while preserving one's own personal integrity.

By what authority? Moses'? John the Baptist's? Jesus's? The Buddha's? Krishna's? Mohammed's? Yes, but only as they are felt and heard and processed within the prism of one's own experience, which almost inevitably elevates one of them, or someone or something else, to preeminence in our own particular life and our own particular journey on the spiritual mountain. One should not be afraid of starting to walk a particular path to the exclusion of others, because there'll always be crossroads ahead with new decision points. There will always be new friends and new life experiences and new vistas that open up as one walks. But to sit on one's hands or to stand still is to go nowhere. By what authority? By our own inner light, as long as our eyes are open and our feet are ready to move.

BENEDICTION

For all who see God, may God go with you.

For all who embrace life, may life return your affection.

For all who seek a right path, may a way be found....

And the courage to take it, step by step. AMEN

Robert Mabry Doss

NOTES

ⁱ Exodus 17: 1-7.

ⁱⁱ Matthew 21: 23-32.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha* (New York: New Directions, 1951), pp. 27, 32.

^{iv} Scotty McLennan, *Finding Your Religion: When the Faith You Grew Up With Has Lost Its Meaning* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999).

^v Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Divinity School Address," in Brooks Atkinson (ed.), *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Random House, 1950), pp. 65-84.

^{vi} Henry David Thoreau, as quoted in Philip van Doren Stern, *Henry David Thoreau: Writer and Rebel* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1972), p. 303.

^{vii} Herbert Benson, *The Relaxation Response* (New York: Avon, 1975).

^{viii} Herbert Benson, *Timeless Healing: The Power and Biology of Belief* (New York: Scribner, 1997).