



## Authority

*The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community. We explore each theme in worship and in our newsletter; in covenant groups, guided writing sessions and Wednesday evening programming; and in our community outreach ministries, our literary journal and programs, and many other opportunities. The January theme is Authority.*

You are part of this church because of authority.

No, not like in centuries past, when civic and ecclesiastical authorities compelled the citizenry to participate in specific religions. Rather, you probably wouldn't be here in this church if you didn't accept its concepts of authority.

The history of religion and theology is, in a sense, a history of authority, and that history is forever unfolding. Where do we turn when we need to answer a moral or existential question? To reason? Scripture? Clergy? Experience? Tradition? Revelation? The gathered community?

### Authority Resources

#### BOOKS

***Who Owns History?*** by Eric Foner, is a collection of essays that take a critical look at how history gets recorded.

***Hunger Games***, by Suzanne Collins, is a young adult science fiction novel in which the government holds a survival contest among teenagers.

***Parable of the Sower***, by Octavia Butler, is set in a violent and anarchic future, and the 18-year-old protagonist dreams of a better world.

#### MOVIES

***Stranger Than Fiction***, a 2006 feature in which the main character of the film discovers he's the main character in a novel that's still being written.

***As It Is in Heaven***, a 2004 Swedish film in which a man finds a new beginning in the hometown where he was bullied.

#### ONLINE

***The Cambridge Platform***, written in 1648 by the Puritan forebears of American Unitarians. <http://www.americanphilosophy.net/cambridgeplatform.htm>

Authority can be especially complicated in Unitarian Universalist congregations, which attract more than a few people who didn't like the sources or structures of authority of their previous religions. They may have started off questioning authority and ended up fleeing it, or fleeing a certain kind of it.

There is authority in UU congregations, of course. It's sitting right next to you in the pews, it's up in the pulpit, it's in your own mind and heart.

That's because we have our roots in congregationalism, the idea that it is up to the members to decide how a parish is best served, and by which minister. When some Christian groups started seeking greater freedom in the United States four centuries ago, they left the bishops behind and found more authority in the community, its chosen clergy, and scripture.

And scripture, as even the ancient Christians knew, is a complicated source of authority. Which books are allowed in the canon? What kind of meaning is changed in translation, and whose translations are authoritative? Should lay people be allowed to read scripture in their own language?

In a Christian context, the scriptural debates are countless and without end. In a UU context, where the Bible is one among many sources of written inspiration, no one person or body has the authority to decide which writings have authority for all. So there is no canon — except perhaps, as we like to joke, the poetry of Mary Oliver. There may be no final say on the interpretation of a particular text, even within a church community.

Authority itself is a tricky word. Authority differs from power, which can be seized and is related to ability; authority has to be granted and is more relational. Did Jesus grant authority to his disciples, or did they claim it? When Norbert Čapek, the Czech Unitarian who gave us flower communion, was imprisoned by the Nazis, the Nazis did so with power, but not with authority. They had the ability to capture him, but he granted them no authority over his heart.

Religious liberals don't allow others to think our theology for us. Revelation is always being tested, and our theological conversation goes beyond saying yes to sources of authority that have been selected by someone else.

Perceptions of authority also affect how we learn and how we teach each other. Sometimes, the teacher is the authority who conveys information to the student. But the teacher may instead frame the conversation in a way that kindles the student's own authority, and answers come from within. A belief that we all have gifts waiting to be tapped is a part of our collective identity.

Long ago, ministers were the only formally educated people in town and were expected to have concrete answers to the big questions. Literacy was rare, and books were hard to come by. Today, people can access vast amounts of information on their own, and there are countless ways to look for answers, within and without. Those of us in the liberal church benefit from a wide range of authority — not only reason, experience, literature, and revelation, but also clergy, tradition, and the fundamental authority of the gathered community.

– Compiled by Ministerial Intern Jim Foti