

The Question: Q & Q, Not Q & A

From the series: Q & Q: The Religious Quest and Question

Scripture: John 23:1-10, Luke 4:1-13

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
Epiphany, January 17, 1999

Transcription of the spoken sermon

My Epiphany series continues. The theme, "Q & Q: The Religious Quest and Question," points to the vision of the Center for Religion and Life that we are inaugurating, as I announced last Sunday. That vision assumes a religious quest as intrinsic to human existence. That quest is triggered by the questions that confront our human awareness. The particular mark of our vision is that in our quest we uncover the questions that meet us in our human experience and that the clarifying of those ultimate questions is the purpose of the quest.

As the title of today's sermon indicates, at Christ Community we understand our human journey as one marked by Quest and Question, Q & Q, rather than Q & A, Question and Answer.

I touched on this last week when pointing to the religious quest. Institutional religion has been in the Q & A model, not Q & Q. The very fact that a religious founding experience - such as Moses at the burning bush, or the life and death of Jesus - ever achieves institutional form is because answers are provided to the human questions.

A picture is painted, a story is woven, a ritual develops to channel devotion, a way of living is prescribed, and a people is formed who shape a tradition and there emerges: Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam.

If I were to put my finger on the significant transformations in my own faith understanding in recent years, one would be in the area of the nature of religion. I learned from my mentor Hendrikus Berkhof in The Netherlands 30 years ago that every religion has three aspects -a teaching or dogma; a ritual or form of worship; and, a moral code or way of life.

More recently, I have come to understand that every great religious tradition begins in a founding experience - Moses at the burning bush leading to the Exodus of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, Jesus' life and death and the experience of his living presence still in the community. Professor Boyd Wilson, with us again for a few weeks, could relate such founding moments for all the

great traditions and he could go on to portray how those founding experiences led to the shaping of a tradition, a world view.

Some of us are studying a work by Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*, in which he demonstrates that a religious tradition, be it Christian or any other, is a creative, imaginative, human structure by which a people has gained orientation for life, a life-map for the human journey. Those life-maps answer the questions raised by our human experience, give a sense of meaning and purpose to human life, and reflect God's being and intention.

For me, that understanding has been liberating, for I have come to see our respective religious systems and institutional forms as human creations rather than Divine givens. This has been a great part of my freedom to examine critically my own tradition and to be open to the insights and values of other traditions - seeing them not as false paths and a threat to the one true way, but complementary ways of responding to the Ultimate Mystery that is God.

If my religion, the Christian religion, was the direct result of God's structuring rather than human response to God's revelation as the Ultimate Mystery of our existence, then I am struck with it so to speak, no matter what further unfolding of knowledge there is about the universe or further development of human history. Then I have a religious structure that arose in an ancient time as Divinely authorized but incapable of making sense of the exploding knowledge of the world, the human being and human culture.

But, if I understand it as an authentic response to the experience of God in an ancient time with a developed story and developing tradition, then I can be part of an ongoing transformation of its insights and teachings. Then I stand within my religious tradition and seek understanding of the mystery of my existence before the face of the Ultimate Mystery that we call God.

Then I come to realize that I must continue the quest because the questions are mine and I must live with them because that is the very nature of being human; we are historical beings. Our lives are lived in the unfolding story of history, which is part of the unfolding of cosmic history of billions of years of spatial dimensions beyond our capacity even to imagine.

How will we find our way?

Let me suggest that, given the nature of being human, that is, being historical, in movement into the future with further unfolding the constant experience, we can do no more than clarify the questions that drive our quest -Ultimate Questions – another way to describe religious questions, because when they are consciously faced, we are on the religious quest which is a quest for meaning.

How, then, do we live in the dynamic movement that is our history?

By faith, trust in God - trust which rests without knowing. It is not that we do not think nor that we are without knowledge which arises out of our thinking and experience. And we do not begin with a clean slate as though we are the first creatures to ask deep questions. But, it is precisely our human situation of being caught up in the stream of history that makes all our answers provisional, tentative, and open to critique.

Faith is a gift and a choice. A gift - bestowed by the Spirit, but also a choice before the mystery of our existence. We are not dealing with that dimension of reality that is subject to verification through the scientific method.

In light of experience, through serious thinking, a religious tradition develops and we are nurtured in it, find a place to stand within it, an attitude of trust grows and we find meaning, direction; we have a life-map which gives us a sense of orientation. We trust. We live by faith.

But, knowledge grows, experience widens, new questions arise, and we bring new discovery and fresh experience to our religious tradition, causing that tradition to adjust to assimilate the new.

Ultimate questions keep us on the quest. The quest raises new questions that challenge our belief system, forcing us to find a more adequate understanding of our human existence.

There is an interesting dialogue going on at present in the Christian Church. Some weeks ago I mentioned an article in *The Christian Century* by the Sociologist of Religion, Peter Berger, who addressed the question of "Protestantism and the Quest for Certainty." Berger is a sociologist; he observes what is actually going on with people and social institutions. He expresses precisely what I have been trying to describe above - that history has brought us to a situation of pluralism where much that was taken for granted and never questioned suddenly no longer can be simply taken for granted because we become aware of alternative news and responses.

That is our world. We are living with this every day.

Recognizing there is within the human mind and heart the quest for certainty, at least on the most important question, there is tension set up in the human soul and we may be tempted to a radical relativism, even nihilism, denying any Truth accessible to human cognition, or, to fundamentalism and even fanaticism.

References:

Gordon Kaufman. *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*. Harvard University Press, 1995.