



**RELIGION WITHOUT DOCTRINE**

Peter G. Ossorio  
1978

*This report is a transcript of a talk delivered to the First Unitarian Fellowship, Boulder, Colorado on November 5, 1978. We are very grateful to Mary McDermott Shideler for making the transcript available. It was originally published as Linguistics Research Institute Report No. 19.*

The main reason I'm here today is that Earlene suggested a general topic that would be of interest to this group, and it's one that I have had some experience with in a different context, and that topic is, "How do you do without doctrine?" I've had a lot of experience doing without doctrine in practicing psychology, in conceptualizing science, in theorizing, and so forth. So as somebody who has been through some of the hard knocks of getting along without doctrines, I thought that I might share some of the ideas that I've found useful in other areas, and then lay upon you the task of transferring—if you can—some of those ideas to the specific issue of religion and spiritual life.

So what I'd like to do is simply introduce about three different things, and then open up the day for discussion.

The first thing has to do with the issue of doctrine in general, and for this I have a simple schema. By the way, the whole business of getting along without doctrine, you will probably not be surprised that how you do it and what's involved is itself not easily reduced to doctrine. If it were, I'd give you a ten-minute lecture. So what I'm going to do is introduce certain things, and then we'll hash it out. Now the first is a simple-looking list, and it is simple:  
[blackboard]

**Q:** These are called what?

**P:** I'm not sure what to call them. We call it a ladder, a Justification Ladder among other things. The reason is that you justify anything on this list by appealing to something higher on the list. Down here at the bottom two, at the level of custom and judgment, is where we live our day to day lives. At each moment you're making judgments about what's here, what you're doing, what it looks like, what you're up to, and so forth. 'Custom' is what we're engaging in all the time when we drive a car, when we sit down for dinner, when we attend a meeting, when we read a book, when we talk to somebody on the telephone—whatever we do,

Ability-Sensitivity  
principle  
theory  
custom  
judgment

**Figure 1. Justification Ladder**

## Religion Without Doctrine

we are participating in one of the customs that people in our society do engage in. So everyday life is here, at the level of judgment and participating in customary activities.

Doctrine appears at this level [of principle and theory]. If somebody challenges a custom—"Why should we do this? I don't think we should do this,"—then you appeal to a theory or principle. If somebody says, "I don't believe we should be driving on the right side of the road," we say, "But we believe in maximizing safety, and this will do it." So you appeal to principles when a custom is challenged, you appeal to a custom when your judgment is challenged. If somebody says, "Why do you call that a cup?", I say, "Well, that's what we do call cups." I back up my judgment by appealing to a custom. If the custom is challenged, I appeal to a theory—or a principle. And this is where doctrine is.

The main thing I want to introduce is the top line. People are used to talking about the bottom line, these days—I want to introduce you to the top line. The top line has to do with the ability or sensitivity to raise the kind of questions for which these [principle, theory, custom, judgment] provide answers. And here it might be a good idea to go to other areas for examples. The first one that comes to mind is in the area of art. You have art theory, you have art principles, and you have particulars—particular works of art. And if somebody says, "Why do you think that's a good work of art?", you can appeal to a theory and show that this particular thing embodies that theory, or that it embodies certain principles about balance and harmony, etc. But you may also say, "Well, I know that it doesn't fit here, and I can't tell you why, but can't you see that it's good art?" We all know people whose judgment is good in the artistic realm, who have good taste, whose judgment is good, and who do not operate with theories, who haven't learned theory and don't even have their own theory. But you trust them to make the judgment; you figure that in general, their judgment is good.

What this corresponds to is understanding the question. If somebody says, "Is this a good picture?", imagine what it takes even to understand the question, what it takes by way of understanding, what it takes by way of ability, because if you don't have the ability to understand the question, none of the answers will make sense either. So why I separate this [ability, sensitivity] from all of these others is that here is where you find the issue of what question it is, and understanding the whole question, whereas the others can be lumped together in one sense as simply different levels of providing answers.

Once you have that distinction, then you can see why somebody can have good taste in art, and not be using a theory or a principle, because what it basically takes is ability or sensitivity. And principles and theories are ways of systematizing, recording, the kind of thing that we're using here [ability], and we may succeed more or less, but it's unlikely that we ever succeed completely. We usually can do better than we can account for. And, you might say, it's only because we had that, or somebody had that to begin with, that anybody was able originally to come up with a theory or a principle for art. What would it take to be the first person to create a theory or state a principle? Here's what it takes [ability].

This is as much as I want to say to introduce the idea of what are the possibilities of operating without doctrine. To summarize: what it takes to operate without doctrine is what it would take to create doctrine, namely, to have the understanding, ability, sensitivity to understand certain kinds of questions. If you can do that, then potentially you are the creator of doctrine, and therefore of new doctrine, within that area. Or you have the potential to operate without any doctrine by simply operating directly in terms of your understanding or ability.

**Q.** But somebody else will make the doctrine sooner or later.

**P.** Well, maybe, maybe not. But I wouldn't be discouraged from making a doctrine just by the idea that somebody else might do the same.

## Religion Without Doctrine

**Q.** I mean that sooner or later there will be one.

**P.** Yeah. But again, as I say, we've never in any area that I know of succeeded in completely accounting for our abilities with reference to descriptions and truths. So there's always that gap. In fact, that gap is what you appeal to when you find a theory for it, when you say, "We need a better one." Again, you're appealing at this level [ability].

**Q.** Sometimes that's a kind of intuition.

**P.** Yeah, and if you don't recognize it as legitimate, you have qualms, you make up pejorative names. I think 'intuition' is a kind of pejorative, whether you call it 'faith' or something else which sounds second-best but isn't.

Having said this much about the possibility of operating without doctrine, let me introduce the counterpoise, the dangers of operating without doctrine. If you think in terms of social evolution, one of the things that comes to mind is that the principles, the theories, the doctrines we have are our social means for not going wrong in just operating on the basis of ability. There's a lot of safeguards built into our theorizing, our explanations, our generally accepted principles. Why? Because you can easily go wrong just operating direct from understanding or ability. You might think of a mystic as somebody who routinely does that. A mystic is somebody who routinely simply operates from his understanding of himself and the world without any appeal to theory, principle, or custom, and that's why oftentimes he does strange-looking things. Mystics get into trouble unless they are also saints. [laughter] There is that danger that just operating here doesn't guarantee that you do it right. It doesn't guarantee that you don't destroy yourself or other people, because there is such a thing as wishful thinking, there is such a thing as being confused, there is such a thing as not having sensitivity or understanding enough. So there are dangers.

As I say, principles and theories are a social safeguard against many of those dangers. There's another safeguard that I think is also well known, and it may be particularly important to this group, namely other people. Other people who basically have the same sensitivity and understanding are your best safeguard against going wrong. Two heads are generally better than one on matters of this sort. So that if you have a group of people with essentially the same kind of understanding, the same kind of ability, then the group—or one by one, each member—can serve as a safeguard for each other member in terms of "Is he going off? Is he doing wishful thinking? Is he confused?"

**Q.** It also works the other way, though, doesn't it?—like within political movements like Nazism and things like that, Fascism, that you get your two heads together and they're influencing a third.

**P.** Groups can be coercive on individuals, but if you have individuals you are operating from their ability, it's hard for the group to be coercive. If I tell you there's a cup on the table and you look and you can see it, you don't have to take my word or anybody else's. You can see it. So it's going to be hard for the whole of us, even if we jump all over you, to convince you there isn't. You may give in, but you won't be fooled. It's when you're not operating from your ability that then you can fairly easily be coerced by a group, because you have nothing else to anchor on.

**Q.** But groups also use propaganda techniques that appeal in such a way you think you might see a cup.

**P.** The more clearly you're operating from ability, the harder it is going for you to be misled. But I will say that there are no guarantees. There are no guarantees that the group is not confusing you; there are no guarantees when you think that you're right and not them. There's no guarantee that if you think you're right and you're spreading the word that

Ultimates  
Totalities .  
Boundary Conditions

**Figure 2. No title**

## Religion Without Doctrine

you have, that that's the true word. All we can talk about are the safeguards against being wrong, because basically it's stemming from here [ability], and you don't have a guarantee that your ability, that your understanding, is enough for the occasion. I think what happens is, it seems good enough to you, you try it out, and other people's reactions give you clues as to what you can do. And that's different from knowing you're right.

That's the second notion that I wanted to introduce, namely, that you can go wrong operating from competence, and what some of the kinds of safeguards are. The third one is specifically what's the difference between how this might work in art or in science or in other areas, as against how it might work in religion or in the spiritual life. Because they're different areas, and what holds in one needn't hold in others. So let me introduce these notions [blackboard]:

I would suggest that the spiritual domain is anchored on these kinds of notions. You're into the spiritual domain when you ask ultimate questions—"What's the ultimate meaning of life?", when you deal with totalities—"What is the entire world like? What is my whole life like? How should I live my whole life?" And 'Boundary conditions' is a little harder to explain, but think in terms of, "When have I reached the limit? For example, if I tell you that I know something, you may ask me how I know and I may be able to give you an answer. Then when I give you the answer, that has to be something else that I know, and so you may ask be about it, and I may give you an answer. But ultimately, we reach some kind of end because I can't give you answers forever. All knowledge has that structure, that you can back up some knowledge with other knowledge, and you can back that up with some other, but there is never an infinite sequence of backing up. You do reach an end point. The fact that you reach an end point is an example of a boundary condition with respect to knowledge, that knowledge is not founded on an infinite set of foundations, nor is it founded on a secure foundation. A secure foundation is just some other fact that one can ask questions about. So knowledge starts somewhere, and it doesn't start from further knowledge, ultimately. And it's in dealing with such questions as, "Where does our knowledge come from? What is its foundation? What kind of confidence can we have in it?"—these kinds of questions, I think, are what you're dealing with when you think of a religion.

I think of a religion as a theory in this domain. A religion is one that primarily provides answers to these kinds of questions. And because it works that way, you can operate in this domain from understanding and ability without a specifically religious doctrine, but then you're running the same kind of risks that we pointed out over here [the ladder].

**Q.** I would like you to explain the totalities again. I didn't quite get the meaning of that.

**P.** Think of the difference between asking, "Should I drink this cup of coffee" and saying, "Yeah, because I'm thirsty," versus saying, "Where does coffee-drinking fit in my life? Where does my life fit into human life?" When you go to the total picture—you see how they connect: when you get the total picture, you have an ultimate answer because there's no place else you can look for an answer. And the kind of questions that really get to us are of that sort: What should my whole life be like? What do I really want? What is the ultimately right way to live? What I suggest is that there's only one place to turn to, namely, here [ability], if you're not already into a doctrine. If you do this, you have options of going to community-correction or of building up new doctrine. Or of going it alone.

**Q.** Can you just jump over to principle and leave out theory, and not—

**P.** Yes. These [principle and theory] are relatively interchangeable in that you might argue that principle belongs here [immediately above custom] and theory here [immediately below ability].

**Q.** It seems to me that one of your checks or tests for the everyday realm could be 'reality-testing.' Does it work? Does it fit with the rest of the facts? But what is the reality against which you can test the spiritual, religious realm?

## Religion Without Doctrine

**P.** There isn't any. That's why I introduced this [boundary condition]. Any particular piece of knowledge can be checked against something else. The totality of our knowledge can't be checked against something else—and it isn't the same kind of thing. It isn't that it's defective because it can't be checked, the way a particular piece of knowledge can be. But if you try to handle it the same way, then you're into some of the binds that people get into—and say, "Our knowledge is not really knowledge because we can't check it all."

**Q.** You need to be pragmatic and see if it works.

**P.** Well, no, because the whole notion of what qualifies as 'working' will embody your answer to "What ought life to be like?" So you've already decided something in order to apply the test of, "Does it work?" That exemplifies what I say when I say that ultimately, this [ability] is what you appeal to. You can't appeal to the principle of "Does it work?" because one can challenge that.

**Q.** I guess I'm still not very clear on how to differentiate between the concept of the totality, and the ultimate. I sort of get it: a totality involves something like how does something fit into the whole picture, but I don't know what the jump is from there to ultimates.

**P.** I haven't tried to connect them very closely. I just made the one connection that when you take everything into account, in answering a question, you will also have an ultimate answer because there's nothing further to appeal to for an answer. You can generate limited answers by asking within a limited context—for this purpose, for that purpose, etc., what's the answer? But then you can say, "All in all, when you take everything into consideration, what's then?" it's an ultimate answer. Again, the connection with boundary conditions—that's why I did it in terms of knowledge. If you think of the totality of knowledge, it comes to an end, it's bounded. you don't keep it up forever. But you have to talk about some kind of totality to see that, because any single piece of knowledge is not that way.

**Q.** Given the fact that doctrines underlie every kind of institution we can think of, including science, where would be the start in which to get people to think beyond doctrines?

**P.** The classic answer is, "Provide them with a new doctrine." The other is to provide them with an example, a new set of customs, a new set of ways of behaving, and then appeal to them to say, "Can't you see that this makes the same general kind of sense as the doctrine and the behaviors that go with it that you have?" This is what I try to do with our scientists up here, say, "Look, these procedures do not fit your principles, but can't you see that following them is contributing to our systematic understanding, and if that isn't what science is all about, what is it?" So you can generate new customs as well as new doctrines.

**Q.** I guess my question is, you yourself can begin to think of an alternate way of knowing, but then—

**P.** Not an alternate way of knowing, just—again, what are answers to some questions within this domain.

**Q.** What is the understanding of the question, yeah. But in a sense, it relates back to what the concept of self is, and it seems to me that to be able to get people to understand what the nature of the question is requires a whole different notion of what the self is.

**P.** No, what happens is that one of the limitations here is that you can only speak directly to people who can see what you can see. If they can't, you have to educate them, and maybe they still can't. But you can't just talk to somebody about something that he can't understand or can't see.

**Q.** Is he depending on principles, theories, and customs that he's familiar with?

**P.** Our educational system is not good for focusing here [ability]. Very often, children learn at any of they levels by rote, and they do not understand, for examples, the rationales for our customs. Or they learn a theory and they do not understand what theories are all about. So you

## Religion Without Doctrine

can be socialized at any level and stop there, and then indeed an appeal to a higher level is not going to carry much weight with you.

**Q.** The place I see most people stop is the inability to accept paradoxes. They think one has to be right and the other just doesn't exist.

**P.** It's awfully hard to act on a paradox. [laughter] So if you're going to act, you pretty well have to choose one or the other, or simply reject it, and the word 'paradox' is in effect a rejection of it.

**Q.** But you can't look in another dimension.

**P.** If you can show that it isn't a paradox after all, that's fine. But if you just take the paradox as a paradox, there's nothing much you can do with it except call it that. So since these things connect to behavior, we want consistency of some sort in order to have—what?—consistency in behavior in order to have behaviors not just occur one by one, but have a whole set of behaviors making some kind of sense. I can't talk too much about mystics. I don't know about them.

**Q.** Would you talk about sensitivities and the development of sensitivity—is that a social practice?

**P.** No. Sensitivity and ability result from experience and education. You're not born with artistic sensitivity. You're not born with spiritual understanding. You acquire that through your experience, through whatever socializing you've been through, and also through what you try to do and how you succeed, and when you reflect upon it, what your thinking is. It's true that there do seem to be inborn limits. Some people, you might say, have more talent of any sort, including this sort [sensitivity], so that they learn faster, they learn more than exposed to the same kind of conditions. The same with sensitivity. If you've ever run an art appreciation class, you can see what a wide range—some of the people will pick it up as soon as you mention it, they're almost right there and sometimes they're even ahead of you. Other people, at the end will be asking the same questions that they were asking at the beginning. [laughter] And by the way, one of the questions that people ask that is most destructive to learning is, "How do you do it?" Because if you think about it, "How do you do it?" implies that there is a way of doing it that reduces to what I already know. Just give me the right set of instructions for doing some of the things I can do already, and then I'll have it. Well, that's exactly the wrong way to expand your understanding and ability. And yet it's inevitable, because there's what you might call a universal human tendency to see things as problems which then need to be solved, and problems can only be solved if they can be reduced to something you can do that you already know how to do.

**Q.** But sometimes, when you start doing something, then you get insights just by the process of working with it.

**P.** But it's hard to count on it, and if you can't count on it, it's hard to bring it into your calculations about what to do.

**Q.** No, I say you just have to start doing it.

**P.** You see, there's very few things that you're willing to do just on the hope or mere possibility that something good will come from it. Because you've got all kinds of other things that you can do, that you have more certainty about what you're going to get out of it.

**Q.** I see some relationship to this between open and closed minds, and I was thinking of—and so on, and why that develops in people.

**P.** One of the boundary conditions in ultimates is that all of us have our limitations, and we have the problem of trying to understand them and operate as best we can within them. And, you can say, some people have more, some people have less. You can praise people for having more of something, You can argue with people for having less of something. But ultimately, we all are

## Religion Without Doctrine

limited, and so in that sense we all have the same problem: How do we operate within our actual limits, instead of wishing that we didn't have those. That's one of those ultimate human problems.

**Q.** This "How does it work?" thing is really worrying me a little bit, because ultimately you would like to reduce to practice some of these new concepts and ideas that are being generated.

**P.** Yeah. If you introduce new concepts, then you've got principles or theories. If you simply introduce new customs you don't need much, certainly not the kind that would give you principle or theory.

**Q.** But there is a reduction to practice somewhere in there.

**P.** It's not a reduction to practice. That's one of those poisonous terms. Suppose you call it a 'realization' or 'embodiment.' We embody our principles in our customs and particular behaviors. You're right, that is one of the acid tests. Somebody can come up with a Utopian set of principles, and then we find that nobody can live that way. So one of the acid tests is: Can you live that way? That's why this is the kind of idea you have in mind [ultimacy, totality, boundary condition]. One of the things you can do is look at examples of how other people live, and generate your descriptions and your critiques, and from that it may do something for you in terms of sensitizing you to what was wrong with them, and give you ideas of how to do the same kind of thing but without making their mistakes.

**Q.** Or conversely, copy their successes or analyze their successes.

**P.** Yeah, After all, we have all kinds of ingredients lying around, embodied in theories, principles, customs, etc., to use in any kind of new construction or in one's own thinking about things. The trouble is that many times, they are so committed that if we follow up what looks like a good thing, we find ourselves right back into the old theories, because they were built in. ... I must confess, if I were in your shoes, I'd be saying, "How do you do it?"[laughter]

**Q.** I was just thinking about trying to tie it in to Unitarianism, and the fact that we have some assumptions that we're all in the same place and having the same approach, but we don't really, and that's one of the reasons why we may have a number of conflicts within the group. Of course, those conflicts exist in any religious group, but ours aren't down so much at the theory level, perhaps, as they are in what we are actually able to see and perceive and understand each other.

**P.** Let me suggest a general principle here, that you engage in social behavior in terms of what you share with people, and where there are differences, you can't do something jointly in terms of those differences. You can have interactions, customs, institutions that allow for differences, but what you do together hinges on what you share. So part of the importance of the differences, at any level, is that that sets limits to what the group as a group can do, what the members of the group can do with one another.

**Q.** But it could be such a one that we could come in with our different points of view and enjoy sharing those, because there is an acceptance involved even though we don't all stand at the same places, but it could be considered a close sharing group.

**P.** It's not just sharing of one's viewpoint. Think of a team as a good example of why you have to have sharing. A team has a place, say a football team since we're still suffering from the shock of yesterday. [laughter] A football team has a number of different positions, and you play them differently. There's a place for differences there. However, imagine what would happen if the tackles and the quarterback disagreed about who was going to call the signals. You wouldn't have a football game. There has to be sharing of that sort in order for there to be a social enterprise in which different people do different things. They've got to have a common understanding of what they are all doing.

**Q.** And roles.

## Religion Without Doctrine

**P.** Well, what there is to be done, because they can shift roles. You can move people around. You can invent new plays. But if they don't share the understanding of what it is to play football, you won't see a football game out there.

**Q.** That's what happens in some of our organizations.

**P.** Sure. In an organization you may get splits of that sort, and then the organization becomes non-functional. And that's the time to split.

**Q.** Would you talk about the highest common denominator? Do you recall—

**P.** You talk about it. [laughter]

**Q.** I recall a conversation once where we—the Unitarian group has a tendency to operate on the things with which people disagree with the least, and the problem of moving off that to something else, and I don't recall what that 'else' was—[laughter]

**P.** Okay, I think I remember doing it. At one time, Earlene and I were involved in the planning of a symposium in which the topic was, "What Is the Humane City?" and it's many of these kinds of things. When you ask, "What is the humane city?", you're kind of talking about the ultimate city, what the whole city is all about, etc. And it occurred to us that the things that get done, politically, in groups, are heavily weighted in terms of the lowest common denominator. For example, municipal money will get spent on roads because everybody agrees that you need to get from one place to another; on sewage because everybody agrees that we ought not to have open sewers; on hospitals because everybody agrees that if somebody is sick, they ought to be taken care of. The major money that gets spent, the group's resources, gets spent in a way that reflects the lowest common denominator of what everybody agrees on. So it's non-controversial, and so it's easy to go ahead and do that. At about that point it occurred to us: the very title of this thing reflects that. Why was the problem, the problem of the 'humane' city, rather than, say, the 'inspiring' city? The 'inspiring' city would call for maximizing something, for developing something to its fullest, and won't see that happening because instead, you get a lowest common denominator way of operating. Being humane, you see, is that. Being humane is simply enacting at least the least of what you owe to somebody just because he is a person and you are. You owe him that much, and if that's what you do, you're being humane. If you prevent suffering, you're being humane. Everybody agrees that we ought to prevent suffering. So about that time, we got clued in as to the pervasiveness of this lowest common denominator thinking, because the thing that we had been assuming as the title, the topic of the whole symposium was itself a reflection of that. And we did a little bit of thinking of how that might be—what alternatives there might be. Because certainly it makes sense, it makes the very kind of sense I've been talking about, and it's a very powerful sort of phenomenon. . It's hard to get away from it.

The one thing that I do remember that seemed to be an alternative was that the way you deal with pluralism—different groups in the city, and remember, the differences in the group are what set the limits to what's common. You go from what's common to what's shared by these people and those people. If you wanted to deal with sub-groups and do some maximizing, you would either have to give them autonomy, or do it in succession. That is, one year you would devote the resources of the group to maximizing the aspiration of one of the sub-groups, and then the next year or the next decade or whatever, toward another. And you could successively, then do something for everybody without at all times just operating on the lowest common denominator, so that in the end, everybody would have got something that was unique to that group, and that's something that you will never get if you are always at the lowest common denominator way of approaching things. And that's as much as I recall.

**Q.** You can't work with the groups successively, often, because they won't wait.

## Religion Without Doctrine

**P.** Yeah. They don't have the faith that their turn will come [laughter], and that may well be realistic.

**Q.** That really hits at one of the things that I've been thinking. I've been taking so many notes because I thought I could use some of this in my talk on civil rights [laughter]—because you are hitting on some of our basic problems. I see how this applies to organizations and to developing policy, the political policies or social policies and so on, but I don't know—I guess I do get to that problem that you said we shouldn't ask.

**P.** About this time I'd like to hear from you about how it connects to the issues of Unitarianism. Because as an outsider, one of my views of Unitarianism is that it has this problem of doing without doctrine. Even if there is some doctrine, it isn't like the doctrine in other religions, and so this ought to be a central issue to the whole enterprise. And that's about as much as I know, so I'd like to hear more about specifically in connection with Unitarianism.

**Q.** Not having doctrine is almost a doctrine.

**Q.** I think we have some basic premises that we work with, that have to do with respect for the individual and that kind of thing, but there are boundary conditions, I guess, on how far we'll go in that respect.

**Q.** I think it comes back in some sense to your humane city. I am not sure that I would like society to organize itself in a way that optimizes the individual wants or needs, because they are in a sense indefinable, and some people can't even define it in terms of your hierarchy. You may not, in your ability or sensitivity, even be able to say what it is you're able to do or sensitive to. So I think it's quite acceptable to—in our humanity, provide for the common denominator needs, so that people don't have to worry and expend their efforts meeting those needs, and indeed they can optimize their own requirements on the higher level. The Unitarian concept, to me, is the acceptance of the individual desires, wishes, etc., so that we all can happily co-exist, rather than coming down to a common custom with—judgments .

**Q.** If anyone is interested, today we put on the bulletin board what we, this fellowship group, the covenant, the solemn promise we made each other, which is our purpose in organizing, which I think might help some of the strangers. It's up there on the wall.

**P.** It strikes me that in the church, there's not a gap between the total group and the individual. In a political unit, there will be group, sub-groups, sub-sub groups, and then down to the individual. One of the options that I mentioned was autonomy, that you put the resources of the total group behind the sub-group and say, 'Use it the way you can.' That means that within their limits of understanding what they're all about, ability to formulate it, etc., they still have the resources of the total group available for that time. Is there anything comparable within his group and the individuals in this group? Is there such a thing as putting, at any given time, the resources of the whole group behind one individual, to help him maximize?

**Q.** Aren't they doing that in the California fire? A church was destroyed and money that was given to the church was then given to individual families to rebuild their homes.

**Q.** You mean they didn't build a church? They really think that people are the church.

**Q.** Maybe it's the same people who later will turn around and build the church.

**P.** Well, rebuilding the homes sounds like humanity again.

**Q.** But were their homes destroyed also in the fire? Oh, I see. Okay.

**Q.** Maybe they felt that was the first priority.

**P.** You could also put it differently, the difference between preventing evils and maximizing good, and one of our observations was that preventing evils is where you find most agreement. Maximizing good is where you find most disagreement.

**Q.** And least action.

## Religion Without Doctrine

**Q.** That seems to fit political campaigns. Everyone agrees that we shouldn't have inflation, but

**Q.** I'd rather have my raise. [laughter]

**Earlene:** Shall we conclude the service, take a coffee break, and those of you who would like to have a moment to formulate a question, come back for discussion.

**Q.** I think it's very relevant, and maybe all we have to do is make the transition, because as I understood the presentation, and I'm not sure I have it all together, but I think it's right in the context of Unitarianism, in that you don't start with doctrine or premises, but to put it in my terms, experience is primary—and that was your first line-up there, in a sense, that experience is primary and that's where you have your individual coming in with his insights, his intuition if you will, and so on. But until that is translated into customs, mores, until it is intelligently and reasonably established, it's just that, and there is no judgment there. And that is, it seems to me, the function of the Unitarian Church. The thing that I wanted Pete to go on with, there, was to relate this to tradition, whatever the Unitarian tradition is, and we like to think of it as being the whole human tradition, but we can't take it all in, so primarily we're—I think—democratic and scientific in our Unitarian tradition, with the Christian tradition coming in, the Judaic tradition coming in, and the Greek, the Renaissance, the whole bit is ours to explore. But in order to get out of our individual insights, inspiration, subjective, which can be solipsistic in a sense, and even the group can become that, we have to have this tradition to relate to. And whether we will or not, it's there operating, and I think it is for the institution to bring it into the present, vitalize it, and make it usable. And to me, of course, one of the things that is happening in Unitarianism today is that we're breaking away from that tradition and becoming too immediate, too enclosed in our own groups, and finally, too—just personal and individualistic.

**P.** I kind of recollect there's a quote from Goethe, and it says, "He who cannot give an account of 3000 years lives in the darkness of inexperience and can only live from day to day."

**Q.** That's it, yeah. And that, it seems to me, is the job of almost any institution, particularly a religious institution, but it's also the job of the university, for example, to carry the tradition on and make it live, re-evaluate it and so on.. We were having a discussion and someone said, "Traditionalism." NO, it's not traditionalism, it's bringing the tradition into the present, adding to it, but it becomes something new almost. I was reading, a lot of sociology of knowledge into your talk.

**P.** Not sociology of knowledge, just plain sociology. [laughter] Let me add some to my comments. This first one, this ladder, originally was introduced as a theory of social change, in interacting with a bunch of Marxist sociologists who claimed that societies were so self-perpetuating that the only way to get change was revolution. My reaction was: No, that's obviously wrong, and yet if you had to say it, what is the vehicle for evolutionary social change rather than revolution? The original version of this is that it's a stability ladder, in that the lower down you go, the faster it changes. But then as a justification ladder, recommended changes are always going to be changes of custom, a change there, by appealing to theories and principles which don't change fast, which for our society probably haven't changed since the Constitution was written—at least some of them. And the appeal takes the form of, "In those days, given that principle—which we still have, don't we?" [laughter] "—it made sense to embody that principle in this particular custom, like non-regulation of trade. Given the changing times, that same principle, in order to be embodied in our lives, has to be done in a different form, like this vast array of consumer laws. So it's the principles and theories that give you the continuity that represents your tradition. The historical changes are changes primarily in custom, and only slowly

## Religion Without Doctrine

—except when you have revolution—in principles and theories. And then back of it all is your sense of the American way of life, of the Christian life, of the spiritual life.

**Q.** I think principles and theories can change without revolution. They do gradually—

**P.** No, I said they don't change suddenly.

**Q.** No, but new ones get introduced.

**P.** That's right.

**Q.** —new economic theories, Keynesianism—

**P.** Yeah. The point is that they generally change slower than customs, and so you can retain continuity by appealing to those things that haven't changed, in introducing the things that you do want to change. That way, you're just not recreating the world every day.

**Q.** To put that in the context of religion, a man that I admire a great deal, and he gets it from that part of our tradition when religion, I think, was at its most vital, and that was in the prophetic period in the Old Testament, the seventh, eighth, ninth century prophets—and his definition of religion, on the basis of his feeling for the office of religion at that time and as it would occasionally appear in the human enterprise, was that the office of religion was to nurture a culture in such a way that you could have the greatest progress and at the same time, maintain enough order so that the society didn't fall apart. So religion then, you see, had that dual function of being out there in front and exploring the possibilities that were there in that civilization, and at the same time being so conscious of what had gone on before that the whole thing was held together, and so you had the Jewish community of Israel that endured down through the centuries with its good and its bad points, but the thing was that you've always had there, and particularly at that time—well, as that element has entered into Western culture over and over again, it has been a dynamic from Marx on. You don't really understand Marx unless you understand his Jewish heritage. But he left that completely. So religion can be so dynamic that it's a shame to see it not operating at this time, in our critical period when it could be doing so much to maintaining what is valuable of the past and at the same time being out there in front saying, "This is what has to be done for individuals, for groups, for the whole society." But this put it into a different perspective. I appreciated it very much. I liked it.

**Q.** I see your tradition as fitting into the totalities, here, to providing a much larger totality in which an individual can fit herself or himself.

**Q.** That's right. Actually, it's what "God" has meant when the term has been really vital, when it hasn't been just something around a cluster of doctrines.

**Q.** Although I had—the comment I was going to make, though, was that what you're doing is giving us another theory to use.

**P.** No. Let me address that, because had I been giving a lecture, that's one of the points that I would have addressed, because it always happens: people tell me that I've got a theory, and I keep hitting them over the head saying, "No, look!"

What I've introduced is a set of distinctions, that's all. I haven't said, "This is the way the world is." I haven't said, "These are true." I've simply said, "Look: here is a set of distinctions." Now distinctions can't be believed. They can't be true. They can't be false. They can be used or not used. Now the value of a distinction is that it adds to your possibilities of acting. As soon as you introduce a distinction, say, between competence and truth, you have a way then of distinguishing something as truth, and treating it differently from if you called it 'competence.' So every one of these distinctions, and any distinction in general, adds to your possibilities of behavior, and it gives you access to certain things that you wouldn't have access to if you didn't make those distinctions. So, unlike a theory that is a body of statements that tells you what is true, and in that sense limits you to these truths and not some others, these are simple things that give you access

## Religion Without Doctrine

to possibilities, and in terms of which you can frame whatever truths you believe are true, but those are not here.

**Q.** You've brought in a new term, 'truth.' I did not consider theories as involving truth. I consider theory as a structure that you impose upon either the universe or some limited part of it, and that it's no more true than another theory, but it might work. That's sort of a pragmatic approach, I guess.

**P.** The notion of imposing, if you push that to the limit, you're going to face the embarrassing question of what is it you're imposing this thing on. You don't have independent access to the world, as well as to your theory, in order to be able to say, "This theory is something I'm imposing on this thing," because when it comes to saying what it is you're imposing it on, lo and behold, what you've got is your very same theory. So it creates certain impossibilities, or at least difficulties, if you talk in that form of imposing ideas on the world. Because you have no access to the world other than through the ideas that you are—what?—imposing? What I prefer to say is that you operate with whatever ideas you have, and not some other set, and there's no implication that any set is sacred or essential or indispensable, etc., but that any given set of distinctions has whatever utility you can give them. That's why I said initially, "Here's a set of distinctions that I found useful in dealing with the problem of non-doctrines over here, and if I found it useful there, it strikes me that you may well find it useful here."

**Q.** Just to possibly give me a handle, maybe some others, what framework are you operating in? Or to put it another way, in terms of value theory, knowledge theory, epistemology, and so on: what school or tradition—

**P.** I reject them all. [laughter]

**Q.** Well, would you consider yourself close to any philosophy? And yet, you say we're talking sociology.

**P.** You see, this is a sociological argument, in effect, that says, "Look, evolutionary change is possible, contrary to your Marxist theory." But that was something created for a purpose, and that itself is not a theory of social change; it's simply a set of distinctions which, if one calls attention to them properly, the other person may see what you see, namely, that social change indeed is possible without revolution. But it's not an argument to that effect, for example. It's a way of helping somebody to see something.

**Q.** Well, then, it seems to me that you could consider yourself rather close to the instrumentalists, the experimentalist school in American philosophy. Why couldn't you?

**P.** That's simply one of the things that I do, and other people do, but that's not all. People also ask questions about, "What is it all about?", and I resonate to those just as I resonate to the talk of getting somebody to see. But the pragmatists wouldn't resonate to those. They would say that's nonsense, to ask what is it all about. I would say: No, it's not nonsense, it's just a very peculiar question which, if you don't recognize its peculiarity, you're going to be out in left field.

**Q.** I don't find that in the best of the American philosophical tradition.

**P.** Traditions, maybe, but particular theories—you will find particular theories that couldn't possibly formulate questions about what's it all about. And specifically, an instrumental theory like Dewey or James—not James so much as Dewey—in which the prime focus is on an instrumental schema, there is no way to incorporate the totality of the world into an instrumental schema. You simply can't formulate questions of that sort within an instrumental schema. So a philosophy of that sort—you say they can raise certain kinds of questions, but we're also interested in other kinds, and for those kinds, you've got to get beyond that. So whereas I'm strong on instrumental, partly because I'm a clinician and I have to worry about how to help people

## Religion Without Doctrine

change, I'm also not just a clinician, and I do think about questions like that, and those are not instrumental, as far as I can see.

**Q.** Well, they don't deny your asking the question. They simply deny or suggest that you'll never know the ultimate answer.

**P.** That itself is an answer, and as an answer, I have to ask, "What kind of answer is it? Is it the kind that could be justified? Is it the kind that you'd better not think of as true or false but simply expressing the stand that somebody takes? Or what?" And I presume that it expresses a stand, because if I take it to be straightforwardly a general statement, then it has a poison quality of this sort: Suppose I told you all, "Look, here is the way the world is, namely, nobody knows how the world is."

**Q.** That's what I thought the answer was. [laughter]

**P.** Somebody who says, "We'll never know the answer to that" is in that position.

**Q.** That's like Hindu definitions of the many-many which is defined by what it isn't. The ultimate is defined by what it isn't, which means that you go round and round it all the time.

**P.** If you treat it as knowledge with a foundation, you'll be frustrated because either you go round and round, or you have no foundation, or you have an arbitrary one, which is the usual—in our Western tradition, you find arbitrary foundations: postulates, first principles, axioms, revelations, whatever, that gives you the starting point for all the rest, and if you get critical about those starting points, then you get discouraged and say, "My God, if this is arbitrary, then everything else that's built on this foundation is also arbitrary," and then you do everything you can to make it as secure as possible, and your conscience is never clear because it is arbitrary. So if there's going to be a resolution on that, it won't be by finding a magic foundation. It will be by recognizing the boundary conditions on knowledge, that it does indeed start somewhere, but that doesn't mean it has to start with a foundation. If you look at the whole system of knowledge and how it works, you'll see it doesn't need a foundation, couldn't possibly have a foundation, and it's not second-best for not having one. Then you lose certain of the questions we have about the foundations of our knowledge, not by having an answer, and not by just saying there is no answer, but by saying something else instead that prevents this issue from being destructive and decisive.

**Q.** There's a difference between saying that you can't have an ultimate answer, and saying that you can't have any answers. You can have a lot of answers without having the ultimate one.

**P.** Well, how would one tell that that was so? Could he just go out and make observations, and from that conclude that you can't have an ultimate answer? Or do you have to be operating within some conceptual system that tells you that even without examining all kinds of particular answers, that there isn't an ultimate one? And if so, what is that system?

**Q.** I'm satisfied with that. I've lived with it for a long time, and it seems to me that for quite a while, Unitarianism has lived with that notion. It seems to me that you can examine an awful lot, from one stance, and you can question or say, "Okay, what I am on now is questionable," so you move over into another perspective and you can look at it, and out of that you don't get an ultimate answer, but you understand an awful lot of yourself, of your society, of your history, of the universe. But you never have the whole thing neatly tied in a package and you call it whatever you want to call it.

**Q.** Historically, that sort of thing has always given way to the need for another ultimate. I don't think this is a problem. You don't have to decide that there's no answer, or decide that this is as far as it can go. Because over and over and over again, these things have broken down with further—

## Religion Without Doctrine

**P.** Let me introduce another principle. This is a procedural principle, and it's a pragmatic one that says, "Let's not accept any principle that makes our enterprise impossible." I would conclude, then we don't need one. Then we're not missing anything vital for not having it. Then I would look for, "How come?" and try to develop my understanding that way.

**Q.** 'Ultimate' is misleading. It should be more like 'highly transitional,' because it doesn't seem like once you have it, that's it. It seems like it should lead to other things. So 'ultimate' seems like there's a definite end, you're putting a lot of conditions on it. I just really believe that 'ultimate' knowledge seems like a misleading term.

**P.** It is, if you take it on the model of ordinary knowledge, ordinary answers. Think of it as a place-holder, though. You remember, I said in talking about this boundary condition, that if you pursue knowledge through its evidence and foundations, you will come to an end. I didn't say you come to an end at any given place. I said you will come to an end. The fact that you come to an end is a boundary condition. Now when you reach that point, you will have what is ultimate for you, then. That will for you be the ultimate answer. This is not to say that for somebody else, when he pursues that same question, he'll come to an ultimate answer. And a year from now when you ask the same questions, you may have a different ultimate answer, but there will always be one.

You need this notion that you're going to reach an end, and that what you have at the end is different from the kind of thing that you start with, because what you have at the end is something which you can't, and don't need then, any further question and answer for. And so indeed, ultimate answers can change from one time to another, but there are ultimate answers. What they are not is guaranteed to be the right answers.

**Q.** Why do you have to have it? I don't see having to have it all in order to — saying "We don't know."

**Q.** Like next Tuesday when you all go to vote, you're making an ultimate decision on a candidate. That's your ultimate answer to ...

**Q.** I think we have a lot of ultimate answers in little things every day. If you're talking about grand philosophical things, it's kind of a different matter.

**P.** 'Ultimate' contrasts with 'limited,' and I think of a passage—I think from the Mikado—in which the princess is being advised by her counselor and she says, "What do you think I ought to do?" And he says, "As your father's oldest friend, I would advise X. As the peer of the realm, I'd advise Y. As your personal counselor, I would say to do Z. As somebody who's lived here for a long time, I'd say to do X." And at the very end, she says, "Yeah, but what do *you* think?" There's an example of ultimate versus limited. You can say, "Well, as a voter I'll do this, as a citizen I'll do that, as an academician I'll do this, as a Democrat I'll do that," But ultimately, I can only do one thing. When I put it all together and act as me, what do I do?

**Q.** Are you putting those conditions, then, under the boundary conditions? Is that what the whole first set would be?

**P.** No, it's just that this, 'ultimate' or 'totality', contrasts with 'limited' and 'restricted' and 'partial.' If I'm only interested in a particular purpose—

**Q.** I'm trying to get the limited in your structure. Where do the limits of decisions fit into your structure?

**P.** They don't appear there, because limited decisions are not the arena of the spiritual life. That's the arena of practical life. If I have a particular purpose in mind, I say, "What should I do for that purpose?" But if I extend and go beyond particular purposes, then I have the flat question, "What shall I do?"—and there I reach the boundary condition. If I say, "What should I do to get ahead? What should I do to make it sell? What should I do to feel comfortable? What should I do

## Religion Without Doctrine

to be respectable?", you can answer those questions in a practical way. But when it comes to "Yeah, but what will I do?", those practical answers are never good enough because they are all incomplete. And that's the ultimate; that's the totality. As I say, that presents a very different kind of problem than practical problems, and that's why if one doesn't recognize their peculiarity, it's easy to talk oneself into blind alleys, into hopelessness, into fictions, into all kinds of things.

**Earlene:** I know from experience how these discussions can go on, but unfortunately we only have the room until twelve .....