



## Who Says?

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Think back to your playground days. Think of the playground and the games we played as children – the games we played without benefit of Game Boys; games that required only balls or sticks or ropes or pure imagination. Think of the chaos of the playground – the chants of the rope jumpers – *Annie and Rollie sittin' up a tree, K, I, S, S, I, N, G*; think of the strident invitations of the picket line calling, *Red Rover, Red Rover, let Kathleen come over*; listen to the thwack of a struck ball and the answering cheer; the rhythmic bouncing of a rubber ball and its musical accompaniment – *1,2,3 O'Leary, 4,5,6 O'Leary, 7,8,9 O'Leary, 10 O'Leary USA*. Now, think of the layers of authority present amidst that chaos.

No, I don't mean the recess monitor. I don't mean the principal looking out his window. I don't mean the bell that will call us back inside momentarily. I mean the iron-bound rules of the games. We all knew them. We all followed them. Let some newby kid from out of town move in and try to tell us that the words for calling in all players were *Olly, olly, oxsun free*, when we knew they were *Ally, ally, ocean free*, and the immediate and inclusive response was, *Oh yeah! Who says?* And that settled it. That's the kind of authority I'm talking about. Unquestioned – unquestionable – authority.

Every system – social, political, playground, you name it – every human system establishes itself by setting out, at its inception, the response to that one question – *Who says?* Who says?

*By order of the King! . . . of the Duke, of the Overseer.  
By order of the President! . . . of the Congress, of the State.  
Hoyle's Rules of Games, Robert's Rules of Order.  
The Bible tells me so. According to the Pentateuch; it says in the Qu'ran.  
Roe v Wade, Brown v the Board of Education*

There is a hierarchy of authorities for every situation; a hierarchy of rules to live by for every occasion; or a hierarchy of who to go to.

*My father can whup your father. Oh, yah! Who says?*  
*We have more nuclear power than you do. Oh, yah! Who says?*  
*You can't go in there. Do you have an appointment? If you want more information, press 'one;' if you want to stay on the line all afternoon, press 'two.'*

Every political regime first establishes authority, whether it be by force or by documentation, or both; whether it be *Do it, or else!* or *We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union . . .* But you have to be able to back it up, this newly established authority. Somebody's going to challenge it. *Who says?* You have to belong to a nation, an army, a tribe, a clan, an institution, a group; you have to have the force of authority behind your words and your actions or nothing will get done.

This is true whether you are establishing a government, a game, or – it's the same process -- a religion. It is no accident that this is the first question answered even before it is asked – “Who says?” *My God can whup your God. Oh, yah! Who says? And the walls came tumbling down.* Think of it. In the days of many gods, you'd be best served to get to know the local God if you wanted to get out of the area alive and intact. Religious wars, probably the justification of most wars if not the excuse, was one way of settling the question, *Who says?*

The Hebrews in their day had a unique concept – one big God, instead of several warring gods. They spoke to their God directly and he listened. And he responded. They said things like, *Just a minute there, God. Are you really going to destroy the just man with the sinner? Perhaps there are fifty just men in the town. Will you really overwhelm them, will you not spare the place for the fifty just men it?* And Yahweh replied, *If at Sodom I find fifty just men in the town, I will spare the whole place because of them.* But he couldn't. He couldn't find 45 and he couldn't find 40, nor 30, nor 20, nor 10. His authority prevailed and the town was destroyed. But he listened to the question *Who says?* and He responded, that he was the supreme authority, after all.

The Jews established their God's authority by covenanting with Him. They established a hierarchy of Prophets, in spite of the people's habit of address God directly – independent diviners who used the authority of this God to speak their own words. Christianity went a step further, enthroning a half-man-half-god prophet, not a totally new idea, but very useful. Following him in authority were disciples and popes and priests. The Muslims used the same formula – Prophet, first, then descendants – only the Shia and the Suni never settled the question *Who Says?* and are to this day

fighting about it, about the true descendants. And to back up the all authorities in these hierarchies were the books. *Who says? The Bible says. The Qu'ran says. God says. Allah says. The one true church says.* And there were religious wars – proof in the success of the winners. Those still standing must have the right authority.

*The Mullah says. The Pope says. The priests say.* And then the new kids from out of town said, *The Pope isn't Jesus. Jesus isn't God. Jesus is a man.* More playground fights. More wars. And more lines of authority cracking, breaking, being re-established. It's an ancient story. It's told over and over and over again. Listen to it. *Who says?*

I'm beginning to depress myself with establishing this historical reminder of the paths of religious authority. I have a point, and I will get to it, but perhaps this is the time to interject a story, an illustration of what I'm talking about – about how important authority is to consider when considering questions of faith. This is the story as it was told to me.

*Some time in the recent past, God figured out how to use the internet. He thought it would be a marvelous way to speak directly again to his servants. Mountain-tops, he realized, were passé. The Pope in Rome was thrilled when he got the email that said that God was going to send Jesus back to earth to re-establish the lines of divine authority. Those upstart Lutherans who opened up a can of heretical worms, so to speak, and their copy-cat followers – Calvinists and women priests and all the rest – would finally get their come-uppance, he thought. As soon as Jesus got the hang of using a telephone, the Pope was advised by God via the new universe wide web, the Pope would be getting a call. And then, one day, it came. "Hello, Your Holiness, this is Jesus calling. I have good news for you and bad news." "I know the good news, Jesus," said the Pope. "You are back on earth. Tell me, how bad is it?" And Jesus said, "I'm calling from Salt Lake City."*

This religious game of authority, this challenge of *Who says?* continues and continues and continues. The Unitarians and the Universalists were in the vanguard of this challenge at one time. They didn't want the priests to interpret the Book. They accepted the Book as authority, but they wanted their own copies to read. The Unitarians said, "Wait a minute. I read that book. There's no mention in it of three gods. No trinity. Just unity. And so they were named and began a new line of authority – God and Man's reason. And the Universalists said, "Wait a minute. I read that book. And it says in here that God is Love. Would a loving god be so cruel as to keep some of his people out of heaven? No hell, they said, just hope. And so they were named and began a new line of authority – of Universal salvation. And so it went. And so it goes. On and on; tirelessly and tiresome. This question of authority is always with us.

That was my ten-minute rundown of the past 5,000 years or so. I share it with you to establish my authority to ask you a question, or more. *What are you doing here?*

*Demanding what? Denominational authority? Congregational authority? Personal authority? What? Who says you have freedom of religion? The Constitution? People, it was written by men. Just like the Bible. What if they were wrong? What if they made a mistake? Congregational polity instead of appointment by the Bishop? We've gotten away with it – so far – but there are many who think we've been cheating. Heretics! Freedom of the pulpit? Really? Are you sure you want that? Who says?*

The answers to all those questions – and those questions have all been asked – have been negotiated down the years – Covenants and Constitutions, Purposes and Principles, bylaws and guidelines – with carefully thought out responses. One hundred fifty years of talks about merger between the Unitarians and the Universalists, and two years in the finalization because people kept asking the question, *Who says?* or some version of it. And we answered everyone's questions to almost everyone's satisfaction. And still outside our doors we are considered heretics; very often considered a non-viable faith because we do not have, will not supply, cannot agree upon a stand-alone answer to the simple question, *Who says?*

And we respond to them, our critics, our detractors, our defilers – we say, *It's important to take into consideration the individual experience, the individual opinion, and the group process of asking the question over and over again. We are not finished here until we can all answer the question, Who says? Revelation is not sealed.*

And that is why among other places and possibilities for you to ask and answer that very question, Small Group Ministry has made that the very first question on its curriculum of suggested questions, of its Year of Seeking and Sojourning – What (or Who) is your religious authority? Unitarian Universalism, having no creed, suggests that its members define their own authority for what they believe. *What do you believe? Is it church tradition, divine revelation, prophetic statements, nature, institution, personal experience, reason, science, scriptures, community stasis, or something else? Why is it important to understand your own authority? Where did it come from? Where is it taking you?*

I don't have all the answers to those questions. I wouldn't tell you if I did; it's against my religion. I have some of my own answers – for now, for the moment, as I see them today. I'll show me mine if you show me yours. I'll start. Some of mine include concepts like Possibility and Potential; experiencing life to its fullest and learning from that; Choice and Responsibility; living your faith, not just talking about it. My authority, my response to the question, comes out of experience and listening to the wisdom of those I admire and respect, and keeping an open mind, but not to the extent that things just fall into it, or out of it. I question my authority on a regular basis, check it against facts and suppositions, challenge and opposition. I try to listen to things more than beings – to the ancestors' breath, to tradition, to what has worked, to what is required, to what is, what exists, what the

dead asked, what the living propose. I try to listen when I ask and let that become part of my authority.

Asking the question about authority, asking *Who says?* is only one first step in approaching the many religious questions that will follow – questions like *How can I be good? What is good – is it the boy who didn't break the dishes or the boy who at least tried? Why do I suffer? How can I celebrate and be grateful? Why am I here?* We, by tradition, start with ourselves, we Unitarian Universalists, because we reason, that is what we have, what we can believe in, but we don't stop there. We look at our relationships – the ones that worked as well as the ones that didn't. Family, church, community, nation, world. What is our authority, the rules we follow there. What is our covenant? Then, and only then, do we have the beginning of a basis for all that follows, for all that is connected.

It is important to know when you are asking civil questions of authority, that personal questions are also included. It is important to remember when you are asking political questions, that religious questions are also included. It is important to remember when asking any question that begins with or responds to *Who says?* that levels of authority are part of everything, even a part of who we assume we are.

Your education gives you authority to speak in certain areas of knowledge. You don't have authority to speak everywhere about everything; you have only opinions in other areas.

Your age gives you authority to speak to certain people about certain things. You don't have authority to tell everyone what to do just because you appear wise.

The way you dress implies some kind of authority. Uniforms do get respect. The well-dressed beggar will make more money than the ragamuffin. It's been proven.

Your money gives you authority to acquire. In some circles, it gives you authority over much, much more.

The color of your skin gives some of you – most of you in this room – the authority to act without thinking; to assume authority.

Birth order gives you authority *vis a vis* your siblings, just as parental status gives you authority over your children, for a while at least.

You cannot bid two clubs over two hearts. You cannot do it; there is a higher authority.

The question *Who says?* is not an idle question. It was introduced to you long before your playground memories. Maybe you got out of practice after that; or maybe you just didn't realize it was the same question you were asking with more sophisticated words. *Do you have a warrant? Can I be a member of this club? Whose life is this, anyway? Am I covered for this surgery?* Maybe you don't recognize the answers to this question of authority are everywhere: *I'm*

*giving you a ticket. You won't be allowed in the theater after the play begins. By the authority vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife.*

*Who says? I think this has my favorite question. It produces some of my favorite answers, and some of my not so favorite. Listen more closely to things than to beings. Who says? Listen to your heart, to your reason, to your traditions, to your ancestors, to your peers, to your colleagues. Listen to your mother; listen to your ministers; all within reason. Listen and listen and listen. Then ask the question. And then speak, in that order.*

It's a beautiful day today. *Who says?* I do, because I'm here with you.