

**A Response to *The Grand Inquisitor***  
Sermon by Deane Perkins

We are nearing Halloween, so I would like to mention two things that have haunted me for decades. The first was many years ago when my parents took my brother and me to see a movie—the movie was Alfred Hitchcock’s, *Psycho*. While it has become a classic among horror films, *Psycho* managed to damage my psyche. It’s all about the shower scene. How could anyone come out of that movie and not be afraid of taking a shower for the rest of his or her life?

My parents, of course, claimed innocence—after all, they didn’t know what it was about! But you have to admit that there is a major difference between an Alfred Hitchcock movie and, say, a Disney movie—at least then--

and between a movie named *Psycho*, and one named, say, *Sleeping Beauty*. On the positive side, watching *Psycho* at 10 years old assured me of having a healthy dislike for horror movies.

About 13 years after seeing *Psycho*, when I was in seminary, I read Fyodor Dostoyevsky's, *The Brothers Karamazov* for one of my classes. In this novel one of the brothers tells another brother a story which has become known as the story of *The Grand Inquisitor*. *The Grand Inquisitor* has haunted me ever since I read the book.

While the story to me is incredibly scary--and therefore, haunting--it is so not because of any horror scene, but because it confronts the reader with seemingly insoluble issues in life that, nevertheless, need to be resolved. So this morning I would like to summarize the story of the *Grand Inquisitor* and respond to it in a way that, I believe, is

commensurate with our values as Unitarian Universalists and speaks to A Religion For Our Time.

This sermon comes about, too, from a story that a member told me after service a couple of weeks ago. She was told just that week by a stranger who approached her that people by nature are sinners. The Grand Inquisitor agrees.

In the Spanish town of Seville in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century a stranger arrives and walks quietly among the people. And yet he is no stranger, for everyone recognizes the man who has the smile of infinite compassion. A blind man cries out: “O Lord, heal me, and I shall see Thee.” And the man who has been blind since childhood sees for the first time in his life. A child’s coffin is laid before the cathedral, and the mother weeps, throws herself at the healer’s feet, and wails: “If it is Thou, raise my child.” The man looks on with

compassion, and with words once again spoken on this earth, softly says, “Maiden, arise!” And the child sits up, looks around, and smiles with wide-open, wondering eyes.

But there is another man watching these scenes—the cardinal of Seville. He is also the Grand Inquisitor—a major player in the Spanish Inquisition of that time--and one who condemned a hundred heretics the day before to the flames of death. He, too, recognizes Jesus who has returned after fifteen centuries, but instead of embracing him, motions his guards to take him prisoner. The crowd bows to the Grand Inquisitor while Jesus is led to the prison of the holy inquisition.

What follows is stunning—the Grand Inquisitor and Jesus are alone in the prison, and, while Jesus remains completely silent, the Grand Inquisitor—in a brilliant monologue—expresses the reasons why Jesus will be

condemned as a heretic and burned at the stake—and the people will allow it.

“Is it Thou?” asks the old Inquisitor? “Don’t answer. Be silent.... Why, then, art Thou come to hinder us?... Didst Thou not often say fifteen centuries ago, ‘I will make you free’? But now Thou hast seen these ‘free men,’ and ‘we’ve paid dearly for it.’ He goes on, looking sternly at Jesus, ‘but at last we have completed that work in Thy name. For fifteen centuries we have been wrestling with Thy freedom, but now it is ended and over for good.... But let me tell Thee that now, to-day, people are more persuaded than ever that they have perfect freedom, yet they have brought their freedom to us and laid it humbly at our feet.’”

The Grand Inquisitor “claims it as a merit for himself and his Church that at last they have vanquished freedom and have done so to make men happy. ‘For now,’ says the

Inquisitor, ‘for the first time it has become possible to think of the happiness of men. Man was created a rebel; and how can rebels be happy? Thou wast warned, but Thou didst reject the only way by which men might be made happy. But, fortunately, departing, Thou didst hand on the work to us....Why, then, hast Thou come to hinder us?’”

Jesus was warned fifteen centuries ago that humankind was incapable of the kind of freedom Jesus manifested through his own words and being, and that people would prefer happiness to freedom. The warning came from “the wise and dread spirit, the spirit of self-destruction and non-existence”—the Devil—who tempted Jesus and asked the three poignant questions.

"Judge Thyself," cries the Grand Inquisitor—“who was right- Thou or he who questioned Thee then?

Remember the first question; its meaning, in other words,

was this: "Thou wouldst go into the world, and art going with empty hands, with some promise of freedom which men in their simplicity and their natural unruliness cannot even understand, which they fear and dread- for nothing has ever been more insupportable for a man and a human society than freedom. But seest Thou these stones in this parched and barren wilderness? Turn them into bread, and mankind will run after Thee like a flock of sheep, grateful and obedient.... But Thou wouldst not deprive man of freedom and didst reject the offer, thinking, what is that freedom worth if obedience is bought with bread? Thou didst reply that man lives not by bread alone."

But the people "will seek us....They will find us and cry to us, 'Feed us, for those who have promised us fire from heaven haven't given it!' And we alone shall feed them in Thy name, declaring falsely that it is in Thy

name.... Oh, never, never can they feed themselves without us!... In the end they will lay their freedom at our feet, and say to us, "Make us your slaves, but feed us." They will understand themselves, at last, that freedom and bread enough for all are inconceivable together, for never, never will they be able to share between them! They will be convinced, too, that they can never be free, for they are weak, vicious, worthless, and rebellious. Thou didst promise them the bread of Heaven, but, I repeat again, can it compare with earthly bread in the eyes of the weak, ever sinful and ignoble race of man? And if for the sake of the bread of Heaven thousands shall follow Thee, what is to become of the millions and tens of thousands of millions of creatures who will not have the strength to forego the earthly bread for the sake of the heavenly? Or dost Thou care only for the tens of thousands of the great and strong,

while the millions, numerous as the sands of the sea, who are weak but love Thee, must exist only for the sake of the great and strong? No, we care for the weak too. They are sinful and rebellious, but in the end they too will become obedient. They will marvel at us and look on us as gods, because we are ready to endure the freedom which they have found so dreadful and to rule over them- so awful it will seem to them to be free. But we shall tell them that we are Thy servants and rule them in Thy name. We shall deceive them again, for we will not let Thee come to us again. That deception will be our suffering, for we shall be forced to lie.”

The Grand Inquisitor continues: "This is the significance of the first question in the wilderness, and this is what Thou hast rejected for the sake of that freedom which Thou hast exalted above everything. Yet in this

question lies hid the great secret of this world. Choosing  
'bread,' Thou wouldst have satisfied the universal and  
everlasting craving of humanity- to find someone to  
worship. So long as man remains free he strives for nothing  
so incessantly and so painfully as to find someone to  
worship. But man seeks to worship what is established  
beyond dispute, so that all men would agree at once to  
worship it. For these pitiful creatures are concerned not  
only to find what one or the other can worship, but to find  
community of worship is the chief misery of every man  
individually and of all humanity from the beginning of  
time. For the sake of common worship they've slain each  
other with the sword.... Thou couldst not but have known,  
this fundamental secret of human nature, but Thou didst  
reject the one infallible banner which was offered Thee to  
make all men bow down to Thee alone- the banner of

earthly bread; and Thou hast rejected it for the sake of freedom and the bread of Heaven.”

The Grand Inquisitor continues to castigate Jesus for asking too much of humankind, for giving people freedom of thought and the freedom of conscience to determine good from evil, for, in fact, what people need are universal community and peace, and the irony is that they will destroy one another in order to get it. But the Catholic Church with its Inquisition can alleviate humankind of this anxiety: “... we shall give them the quiet humble happiness of weak creatures such as they are by nature,” says the Grand Inquisitor. “... we shall persuade them at last not to be proud, for Thou didst lift them up and thereby taught them to be proud. We shall show them that they are weak, that they are only pitiful children, but that childlike happiness is the sweetest of all. They will become timid

and will look to us and huddle close to us in fear, as chicks to the hen.... Oh, we shall allow them even sin, they are weak and helpless, and they will love us like children because we allow them to sin. We shall tell them that every sin will be expiated, if it is done with our permission, that we allow them to sin because we love them, and the punishment for these sins we take upon ourselves.”

The candor and insights provided by the Grand Inquisitor concerning the world and the nature of humankind come from the fact that, he, too, followed Jesus at one time: “Know that I too have been in the wilderness, I too have lived on roots and locusts, I too prized the freedom with which Thou hast blessed men, and I too was striving to stand among Thy elect, among the strong and powerful.... But I awakened and would not serve madness. I turned back and joined the ranks of those who have

corrected Thy work. I left the proud and went back to the humble, for the happiness of the humble. I repeat, tomorrow Thou shalt see that obedient flock who at a sign from me will hasten to heap up the hot cinders about the pile on which I shall burn Thee for coming to hinder us. For if anyone has ever deserved our fires, it is Thou. Tomorrow I shall burn Thee. Dixi.” (I have spoken.) (All quotes

were from: Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, ch. 5, translated by Constance Garnett: [www. Mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/poll16/grand.htm](http://www.Mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/poll16/grand.htm))

I find this story of the Grand Inquisitor’s accusations to Jesus incredibly thoughtful, and incredibly disconcerting. I could easily dismiss the Inquisitor as a power-hungry madman. But judging him as an individual does not nullify the existential, theological, and philosophical questions he poses: What, really, is freedom? Are we capable of reaching the depth that Jesus inspires us to aspire—or is

this the case for only a few—the elect? Is humankind doomed to destroying one another unless there is some kind of powerful, fear-based authority in place? Does love come about even when the means are dubious, and even violent?

I submit that the story of the Grand Inquisitor, much like George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is an indictment on the political situation in our world today.

And I fear that much of what the Grand Inquisitor says is true, given the world we live in, and given the world view that seems to be pervasive—this is what is called *realpolitik* or the real world. And so my response to the Grand Inquisitor is twofold.

One, I refuse to live in his world. What people often call reality is really quite over-rated; I think, for the most part, we create our own reality—we *choose* whether we want to live in a world that is so cynical and self-

destructive, or one that allows for—dare I say it?—more freedom, freedom that comes from our soul and heart, not the freedom espoused by our politicians or the military. I think the pervasive violence that exists in our world, and the daily death of hundreds, even thousands of people in the name of freedom, democracy, and God, are failures, not only of the imagination—or in the language of *realpolitik*: diplomacy--but of our being in touch with our true selves as spiritual and religious beings.

And second—and this, to me, is at the heart of the Grand Inquisitor’s words—I refuse to accept his view of human nature as—and I quote--“weak, worthless, vicious, rebellious, selfish, ignoble, and ever sinful.” This is the mythology that I suspect most of us have grown up with; that is, people, by nature, are sinful, and perhaps even evil. And, therefore, the subsequent political and social systems

that exist are, necessarily, punitive—they have to be in order to save ourselves from ourselves. This is the logic of the Grand Inquisitor; it is the logic of *realpolitik*; it is the logic that pervades our society today. It is, I submit, the easy way out—it is far easier to control, judge and punish people than it is to love them. The love espoused by the Grand Inquisitor is not love at all because it is tainted by his view of human nature. And there is nothing to support his view other than the myths that have been promulgated for millennia by those in power. A 20<sup>th</sup> century Protestant theologian once said, “There are some words that need to be eliminated from theological discourse, and ‘sin’ is one of them.” (R. Niebuhr?)

So I *choose* to think differently about people. And this is, in part, the kind of freedom that I think the Grand Inquisitor lambastes Jesus for, because in true freedom we

*choose* the myths, world view, and values we live by from the internal depth of our own being, not from the external superficialities of our cultural systems.

What might this alternative look like? We have a hint of it from the heresies founded in our own background as Universalists and Unitarians. And so, in a couple of weeks, I would like to continue our discussion of what it means to be A Religion For Our Time.

I would claim, then, that Unitarian Universalism, if it wishes to assert itself as a Religion For Our Time, must first declare loudly that human beings are **NOT** by nature sinful or evil. On the contrary, if we catch only a glimpse of the essence of freedom within ourselves in those silent, still, peaceful moments of the soul, we will see that we are spiritual, holy, divine beings.

May it be so. Amen

