

**“Freedom, Reason, and Tolerance: The Many Blessings of Humanism”**

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Harvard Unitarian Universalist Church

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If you are a reader of the *New York Times*, you may remember having seen an article a few weeks ago about a group in South Carolina called the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry. A couple of months earlier they had put up a billboard in Charleston that said, “Don’t Believe in God? You Are Not Alone.” And then they braced themselves.

This is the state, after all, where the legislature unanimously approved a new license plate with a cross and a stained glass window, which reads, “I Believe.” So, you might expect that the reaction to the billboard would have been hostile. Instead, the response was overwhelmingly positive, the group’s meetings have been attracting record numbers of people, and the Board is having to consider finding a larger place to meet.

Incidentally, the UUA has used a somewhat similar tagline in some of our own advertising campaigns, asking, “Is God Keeping You from Going to Church?” and I believe we’ve seen a similar increase in the number of visitors to the churches in those regions.

None of which surprises me. Our country has seen a rise over the last 3 or 4 decades in Christian fundamentalism, and there are many, many people out there looking for alternatives to the traditional God espoused by that tradition. Some are seeking religious communities where they can worship a more liberal and loving God, and others are seeking communities – religious or not – where they can find meaning and purpose without God.

Earlier this year, one of our members encouraged me to preach about Ethical Humanism. He thought there might be members of our religious assembly who would be interested in the topic and he also wondered if there might be Ethical Humanists in Harvard who are not yet part of our church, but who might come to consider our church as a home.

I agreed with him that Humanism, in general, is a topic that might be of interest to members of our assembly – and more than just a few – and I appreciated both his question and the spirit behind it. If we were to understand Humanism better and if we were better able to articulate our relationship to Humanist thought, there might, in fact, be quite a few people in this and surrounding towns who would be drawn to join us and who might find here with us the kind of community they seek.

So, the questions I want to try to answer this morning are these:

What exactly is Humanism?

What is the relationship between Humanism and Unitarian Universalism?

How has Humanism contributed to who we are today as UU’s?

And, to what extent **could** a Humanist feel at home here – in our assembly and in our movement as a whole?

Those of you who have been part of this or another Unitarian Universalist church for more than a decade may remember a survey that was done back in 1997, called the “Needs and Aspirations Survey.” Perhaps you were among the 10,000 respondents.

The results of the survey indicated that 46% of respondents identified themselves as “Humanist.” The next largest group was “Earth/Nature centered” with 19% - fewer than half as many. Of course, because this was a survey of UU’s, the responses added up to 112%, because some of us couldn’t resist checking more than one box.

I went back to look at the survey this week because I couldn’t remember if the writers had offered definitions of each category. They had not. Which made me curious...how did each of those people who identified themselves as “Humanist” define that term? We don’t know.

It also made me wonder how you would identify yourselves before the term “Humanism” has been defined or described further. Would you mind, by a show of hands, indicating if you would identify yourself as a “Humanist?” *[Approximately 50%]*

Before I leave the survey behind and go on to talk in more depth about Humanism, I want to share the results of three other questions that I found interesting, because I think they are relevant to our conversation this morning.

One of the questions asked, “What is missing for you in your UU experience?”

In response, only 23% said that nothing was missing. A full 76% of respondents said that something was in fact missing. Of those, 30% said they were missing a “greater intensity of celebration, joy and spirituality.”

There was a second question about what was missing more specifically in your congregational experience. Here, 33% said nothing was missing. But the next largest group, 18%, said that they were missing a sense of “spiritual discipline and depth.”

When asked if they had ever considered leaving UU-ism, nearly 60% said yes, with nearly 30% of those reported their reason as a “lack of spirituality, warmth and joy,” and nearly 20% said that we were “too arrogant and cerebral.” Only 8% said there was “too much spirituality.”

So, even among the 46% of respondents who said they were Humanists, a significant number still felt like they were missing something that had to do with spirituality and spiritual depth, which I find interesting.

So before we go further, let’s spend some time talking about what Humanism actually is.

The first thing I want to point out is that Humanism is no more of a monolith than, say, Christianity. There is more than one kind of Humanist. The Humanists in South Carolina that I spoke of are Secular Humanists. The member of this assembly who wanted me to preach about Humanism was referring specifically to Ethical Humanism. Pat Hoertdoerfer wrote about

Religious Humanists in the piece that served as our reading this morning. There are also at least 5-6 other major types of Humanism including something called Christian Humanism.

What divides them is relatively subtle. What they all have in common might be summed up like this:

They “regard the universe as self-existing and not created.”

They believe that humans are “part of nature” and have “emerged as a result of a continuous process.”

They emphasize the worth and potential of human beings

They emphasize the use of reason and scientific inquiry in trying to understand the world

They reject the notion of a supernatural realm

They focus on the here and now, believing that this life is all there is

They believe that humans are responsible for what happens in this life and that we have a moral obligation to care for one another and the earth

Do all Humanists reject the notion of God? Are all Humanists Atheists? That has often been the assumption of both Humanists and non-Humanists. Religious Humanism developed in this country largely as a branch of Unitarianism and many of the signers of the original Humanist Manifesto in 1933 were Unitarian ministers. They did reject the traditional notion of God and were involved in what has become known as the Humanist-Theist Controversy within our movement.

The early Humanists like John Dietrich preached the message that if religion was to survive, it would have to “be brought into harmony with modern thought; [which] meant relinquishing the idea of a divine being in control of the universe.”<sup>1</sup>

In response, the Unitarian Theists, including a man named George Dodson, argued that, “Perhaps only 2 percent of the members of Unitarian churches would support a program without some belief in God.”<sup>2</sup>

Frankly, I’m not sure that controversy has ever really come to an end among us.

But surprise, surprise...not all Humanists do reject the notion of “God” completely. In fact, on the website of the Washington Ethical Society in Washington, DC, which is affiliated with the UUA and the American Ethical Union, a Humanist organization, they explain that...

Ethical Societies take no position on the existence of God. Many members describe themselves as agnostic. However, if by theism one means a Man-God in the sky or an external power who will intercede with special favors, very few members would be theists.

William Murry, a Unitarian Universalist minister and author of *Reason and Reverence: Religious Humanism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, explains it this way: It is not the notion of God, per se, that

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<sup>1</sup> Olds, Mason. American Religious Humanism. Minneapolis: Fellowship of Religious Humanists, 1996, p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

Humanists reject, but the notion of a supernatural God. Some humanists believe that there is a power or force within the natural universe, and some of them call that force “God.”

Which again makes me curious...so I'd like to have you respond to a few questions about “God:”

How many of you would consider yourself strict atheists – there is no such thing as God and the idea of God, no matter how it is defined, is not in anyway useful to you?

*[Approximately 8 people out of approximately 90 present]*

How many of you believe in a traditional idea of God – creator of the universe, utterly separate from the rest of creation, residing in a place outside of the natural world – heaven – who is personal and an authoritarian rule-maker – like an old man in the sky – who occasionally intervenes in the world, subverting the laws of nature, to make miracles happen? *[Zero]*

How many of you believe in something – call it what you will – the Spirit of Life, the Spirit of Love, the Power of creativity – the Life-force – even “God” - that there is something mysterious that is in us and/or around us – mysterious, and yet fully part of the natural world? *[Approximately 75-80%]*

Bill Murry's makes the point that the gap between those who believe in the natural vs. the supernatural is far more significant than that between those who believe god and those who don't, and that it is probably our rejection of the supernatural that defines us as a religious movement. He writes,

“Rather than feeling marginalized, religious humanists should rejoice because this naturalistic theism is much closer to what they believe than traditional theism is. The heart of humanism should not be what we reject but what we affirm.”<sup>3</sup>

In fact, Humanists should feel proud not only of how they've influenced theists within our movement, but of their contributions to Unitarian Universalism, in general, for we have been very blessed by their presence among us. In fact, it is more than fair to say that we simply would not be who we are as a movement today without Humanism. We should be deeply grateful to the Humanists who came before us and to those who live among us today.

Just look at our rites of passage. In our child dedications, we affirm the goodness and the potential of each child rather than washing away any trace of original sin or depravity. In our memorial services, we celebrate the life of the person now gone rather than an afterlife or an eternal godhead. We tend to believe that people live on through our memories of them rather than in any supernatural way.

In our Coming of Age Program we encourage our 9<sup>th</sup> graders to seek and explore and practice articulating what they believe rather than telling them what we want them to believe. We tell

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<sup>3</sup> Murry, William R., *Reason and Reverence: Religious Humanism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Boston: Skinner House, 2007, p. 52.

them that they are free to think for themselves and to believe what they must based on their own experiences.

All seven of our UU principles, from our affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of every person, to our affirmation of the interdependent web of all existence, we owe, in large measure, to the influence of humanism within our movement.

But, even for all of its many blessings, Humanism also has had its limits, particularly historically speaking. Freedom, one of its central values, has too often been understood as a purely intellectual freedom, which can be very elitist and classist. More people than not in this world lack very basic freedoms that keep them from developing their full human potential. And humanism would do well to focus more on addressing those freedoms than simply the freedom to believe.

Likewise with reason, which as Pat Hoertdoefer has written, “while an indispensable part of our religious “meaning-making,” is not omniscient. There are dimensions of the human predicament, which it cannot fully probe – suffering, evil, death. It is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for deep religion, which is rationality and feeling, will and spirit.” To be fully human, many would argue, includes experiencing and valuing human intuition and a full-range of emotions, as well.

And as for tolerance, too often it has not been extended to those who may not share the humanist’s fundamental assumptions about the world or about god. Humanists, too – just like the rest of us - can be arrogant, dogmatic and intolerant.

Others, including prominent humanists, have also criticized humanism for sometimes being too anthropomorphic – too centered on the importance of human kind without enough attention paid to the environment and the life forms with which we share the world – and too individualistic, not focused enough on the web, on the relationships that sustain us.

William Murry looks squarely at these limitations of traditional humanism and proposes a new kind of Religious Humanism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. This new Humanism would combine the best of Religious Humanism with a tradition called Religious Naturalism, which (like humanism) understands the natural universe as being all there is – in other words, there is no supernatural realm – and which finds religious meaning and “a sense of awe and wonder and reverence and mystery” in nature.

According to Murry, “The two (humanism and naturalism) go together very well...In a word, humanism provides the [moral] values that naturalism lacks, and religious naturalism provides the religious and spiritual aspect that humanism has lacked.”<sup>4</sup>

So, I’m curious again, if I were to ask you now if you would identify as a humanist – after telling you that humanism might include not only atheists, but also those who find meaning and wonder in nature and even those who believe in some sort of wholly natural force, which they may or not

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<sup>4</sup> Murry, William R. “My Evolving Faith: Humanistic Religious Naturalism,” A sermon delivered at the River Road Unitarian Church on Sunday, April 30, 2006.

name “god”...How many of you might count yourselves among the humanists? [Approximately 85-90%]

I think it's clear that a humanist could feel comfortable here. Religious and Ethical humanists probably more so than a secular humanist. We are a religious community, after all, and we do gather together for worship and to celebrate life-passages and other rituals, practices which many secular humanist reject.

What about me? Am I a Humanist? I've been deeply influenced by Judaism and Christianity – particularly the prophetic tradition and the actual teachings of Jesus, which are the humanistic strands of those traditions. I've also been influenced by Buddhism and Taoism and earth-centered spirituality.

If an Agnostic is one who doesn't know for sure whether there is a God or not, then I'm an Agnostic with strong opinions. I don't know. How could I? But I do believe in something that I often call “god.”

I find a great sense of meaning, of connection, of comfort, and of awe in the natural world. I don't believe in a supernatural realm, but I also don't believe for certain that this life is all there is. I won't know for sure what happens after we die until after I've died, if at all. I put my faith largely in that which science reveals, but I also know that science hasn't gotten it all figured out yet. And for every question that is answered through scientific inquiry, a hundred more questions arise. I appreciate live in awe of the mystery, which remains.

The bottom line is that I am a Unitarian Universalist grateful for the best, which Humanism has given to the movement...

The permission to be on a journey, to read, explore, test and grow...

And the push to make a difference in the world, for if I don't – if you don't – who will?  
It's up to us...

So may it be. Amen. And Blessed Be.