

HUMANISM
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When I was in junior high, I declared that I was an atheist. In college, I tempered that a bit and referred to myself as agnostic. It wasn't until seminary, really, that I started using the term "humanist" to refer to my theology. I don't think I had a sense of what it was for a long time, despite its rich history and the way that history intertwines with our own movement of Unitarian Universalism. I know that I have been asked here what a humanist is, as well, so obviously it's a term that people still have some lack of awareness of. What I want to share today is an understanding of religious humanism, its history in our movement, and its place in our current church.

I want to begin with some explanation as to what humanism is. Bill Murry, in our reading, gave one definition. The American Humanist Association gives this definition:

Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without theism and other supernatural beliefs, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity.¹

There is a difference, as Murry pointed out, between secular and religious humanism, although they are close cousins. To put it simply, secular humanists see humanism as a philosophy, and resist attempts to label it a religion. For them, to call humanism a religion would be akin to calling science a religion. To do so would rock the separation of church and state and the understanding of science as a result of knowledge, rather than faith. For religious humanists, humanism is a religious philosophy that rejects the idea that religion should be about that which is outside of natural law, and instead defines spirituality, religion, wonder, and awe as part of the basic human experience. Murry, for example, defines spirituality saying, "I use the word *spirituality* to refer to a quality of life in the here and now, a quality that has to do with genuineness, depth, and devotion to values other than my own self-interest. The Rev. David Bumbaugh, a professor at Meadville Lombard Theological School, and a humanist, has written on a language of reverence from a humanist perspective, saying:

When the Humanist Manifesto declared that we are part of nature and we have emerged as the result of a continuous process, it not only denied the creation stories of the western religious traditions.... It also gave us a language of reverence because it provides a story rooted not in the history of a single tribe or a particular people, but a history rooted in the sum of our knowledge of the universe itself. It gave us a doctrine of incarnation which suggests not that the holy became human in one place at one time to convey a special message to a single chosen people, but that the universe itself is continually incarnating itself in microbes and maples, in humming birds and human beings, constantly inviting us to tease out the revelation contained in stars and atoms and every living thing. A language of reverence for Humanists begins with our understanding of this story as a religious story--a vision of reality that contains within it the sources of a moral, ethical, transcendent self-understanding.²

¹ <http://www.americanhumanist.org/humanism/>

² "Toward a Humanist Vocabulary of Reverence," Rev. David E. Bumbaugh, Associate Professor of Ministry, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, Remarks delivered to the Annual Meeting of the Chicago Area UU Council, May 2001, Published in the Journal of

My own definition of spirituality has been modeled after a definition given by the Rev. Andrew C. Kennedy, a Unitarian Universalist minister whose theology is connected to religious humanism and Buddhism. Spirituality, in this definition, is a series of relationships. They can be seen as concentric circles, getting larger and larger. To be on the spiritual path is to be constantly examining those relationships and achieving balance. The relationships are to self, other people, society, nature, and the cosmos or God.

Humanism, as Murry said, has both its theistic and nontheistic expressions. Religious humanism in our movement is the name we generally give to the nontheistic belief systems in Unitarian Universalism. I say nontheistic, rather than atheistic, because it includes agnosticism, and means rather than a disavowal of God, rather than defining religious practice around what we *don't* believe in, and just saying atheist, humanism instead doesn't put God at the center of the belief system. Saying that it is a religious belief based on what we can know, test, and experience in this life, it defines itself not by God, which is ultimately unknowable, but by humanity, which is at the center of our existence here on this earth.

There are old examples of religious humanism that we can draw from. In Eastern religions, the religious traditions of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism all have nontheistic religious humanist elements. And there was classical Greek humanism, and other humanism movements in history. But religious humanism and secular humanism as we now refer to them can be traced to a movement which began in this country, and in which Unitarianism, and to a lesser extent Universalism, was deeply influential in.

In Unitarianism, the two ministers first identified as humanists were John Dietrich and Curtis Reese. Mason Olds, in *American Religious Humanism* argues that humanism in this incarnation really began with the two of them meeting for the first time in 1917.³ In 1913, Dietrich became the minister of the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, and in 1919, after serving several Midwestern churches, Reese became the secretary of the Western Unitarian Conference. Western Unitarianism in those days meant what we now call the Midwest, and the conference was centered in Chicago. As they began publishing articles and speaking in district and national conferences on their humanism, the humanist-theist controversy erupted in the Unitarian denomination. The controversy came out fully in 1921 when Reese invited Dietrich to give a speech at the Western Unitarian Conference, which was holding the annual meeting in Chicago.⁴ Later that year, the general conference of the Unitarians was in Detroit, and a humanist-theist panel, a debate of sorts, was held. Mason Olds writes that the theists in Unitarianism were moving towards making Unitarianism a creedal religion by passing a creed in which belief in God would have to be professed by all members, but after that conference, in which that critical discussion happened, the moment to create a creed had passed by, and ultimately the strength of humanism in Unitarianism would grow.

In 1928, a group of students at the University of Chicago and some from Meadville Theological School, the Unitarian seminary in Chicago, formed a group called the Humanist Fellowship, and started a publication called the *New Humanist*. That group invited Roy Wood Sellars, a professor at the University of Michigan, to come and speak on religious humanism, and would ask him to write the Humanist Manifesto, which is still a major document in defining humanism. The Humanist Manifesto would be signed in 1933. William Murry writes, "Thirty-

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<http://dallasuu.org/re/adult/huumanist/Bumbaugh.pdf>

³ Olds, 33.

⁴ Olds 38.

four people, all men, signed the Manifesto. A number were philosophers, including famous names like John Dewey.... [Eustace] Haydon and another historian of religion, J.A.C. Fagginer Auer of Harvard Divinity School, signed it. So did fifteen Unitarian Ministers, including Dietrich, Reese, Bragg, Wilson, Lester Mondale, E. Burdette Backus, Charles Francis Potter, and David Rhys Williams. Clinton Lee Scott was the only Universalist minister to sign it, along with one Jewish rabbi.”⁵ The American Humanist Association was founded in 1941, and continues to exist today. Two further manifestos have been written which correct and update some of the troubles found with the first humanist manifesto. Today there are also a number of humanist organizations. The Unitarian Universalist group used to be called Friends of Religious Humanism, but now is called HUUmansists, with two Us. There’s a secular humanist group for those who find the AHA too religious, the Council for Secular Humanism. Within the AHA there’s a group which credentials humanist celebrants who can perform humanist weddings and funerals. So the division continues exists within humanism over whether or not humanism is a religion. Stephen P. Weldon writes, “Religion, they [the secular humanists] argue, most properly refers to belief systems that contain unverifiable supernaturalistic assumptions. Ironically, however, the term secular humanism became popularized by Christian fundamentalists who sought to emphasize the very point which secular humanists objected to: the religious nature of humanism. These fundamentalists often referred back to a 1961 Supreme Court decision, *Torasco v. Watkins*, which eliminated all religious tests for public office. The decision included an important footnote, stating that ‘among religions in this country which do not teach what would generally be considered a belief in God are Buddhism, Taoism, Ethical Culture, Secular Humanism and others.’”⁶

I am a believer that humanism is a religious perspective. Religion is not only, or even primarily, defined by God. It is not, we in Unitarian Universalism often argue, even necessarily defined only by belief. It’s a point I found myself arguing very recently in a meeting of a local community organization. Christianity is defined by a belief in God, and that has been our primary cultural reference point for what religion means, so it is hard for us raised in Christian culture to sometimes grasp what the nature of religion can encompass. But Buddhism and Taoism are nontheistic religions. And Confucianism is one as well. Some argue Confucianism is not a religion because of its lack of supernaturalism. I don’t believe supernaturalism has to be present for something to be religion, however, so I would say it is. Judaism, I have heard it argued, is not defined by what one believes but what one is. One is a Jew—it is a group of people and a religion and a practice, but it does not require a belief. Unitarian Universalism, I would say, is its own religion, and a humanistic one, at that. You can have a belief in God, just as in Judaism, but our religion does not require it of you. It only requires of you that you be a Unitarian Universalist. It requires of you, in our words, to live your religion.

Humanism has grown and changed in our movement, and in the larger Humanist movement as well. There were many things the original humanist manifesto did not encompass that would later become critiques that would be addressed by subsequent manifestos—feminism, the environment, postmodernism. But what it did do was say this: “Religion consists of those actions, purposes, and experiences which are humanly significant. Nothing human is alien to the religious. It includes labor, art, science, philosophy, love, friendship, recreation—all that is in its degree expressive of intelligently satisfying human living. The distinction between the sacred

⁵ Murry, 43.

⁶ Stephen P. Weldon, “Secular Humanism: A Survey of Its Origins and Development.” *Religious Humanism*, vol. XXXIII no. 3-4, summer/fall 1999, Friends of Religious Humanism, 51.

and the secular can no longer be maintained.” The Humanist Manifesto broke down the distinction between sacred and secular, between body and mind, between human and nature, between religion and science, and declared that such dualisms were no longer appropriate in the modern age.

When the humanist movement entered our churches, centered here in the Midwest, it was immediately embattled, but here in this area, we became the stronghold for humanism within the larger Unitarian Universalist movement, until it had to be accepted. Currently, humanists are feeling embattled again in our movement, and the question is out there again, or perhaps it never left, whether there is space in Unitarian Universalism for humanism. The call for a language of reverence from our president has been seen as an attack on humanism, despite the fact that the call originated from a humanist, minister David Bumbaugh, and his essay on a language of reverence. What our president, Bill Sinkford actually said was:

What struck me as I reread the Principles was that they contain not one piece of traditional religious language, not one single word. And this is a wonderment to me.

And then he said that his latest answer to the question “What is a Unitarian Universalist?” is:

"The Unitarian side tells us that there is only one God, one spirit of life, one power of love. The Universalist side tells us that God is a loving God, condemning none of us, valuing the spark of divinity that is in every human being." So my version of what Unitarian Universalism stands for is, "One God, no one left behind."⁷

When people put the two together, they hear that he is saying that our principles should have God in them, that our religion is defined by God. Perhaps he thinks so, but perhaps he doesn't. What he actually has done is draw a very careful line that says we are a religion, we need religious language, and that his religious language is God-language, but he also says clearly that humanism has a religious language, too.

There are other attacks that I heard are out there on humanism. One is the stereotyping of humanists as overly rigid and dry. I have heard it said many times that the younger people coming into our churches are searching for spirituality in a new way. And by this it is sometimes stated, sometimes implied, that humanism is an old way, which needs to be recovered from. I've heard minister after minister in UU churches complain that the humanists in their church complain when they use the term God from the pulpit, or even if there is God in a hymn. They feel like their freedom to speak their own theology of theism from the pulpit is curtailed by the humanist forces in our churches. So humanism feels embattled, and theists feel that the humanists are pushing them out, as well. The humanist-theist controversy of the 1920s is still far from amicably settled in our movement.

Yet I think that here, in our church, we do quite well. This church, a historically Universalist church, a still largely Christian church, called and loved a humanist minister for 20 years with the Rev. Ruth Smith. This church is a church where the largest piece of our pie today is humanist, and where we strive to recognize, respect, and celebrate all world religions, still understands that Christianity has a special place both in our history and in our present, as a primary source from which we draw religious meaning and strength. We recognize both humanism and Christianity in our movement as sources which are primary to our understanding of the world, and which can work in harmony with each other.

⁷ “Share the Good News with a World that Badly Needs It,” William G. Sinkford, *UU World*, March/April 2003 <http://www.uuworld.org/2003/02/calling.html>

Sure, we still have our struggles. I've been told by some they would like to see worship more Christian or less Christian. But I can say, standing before you today, I have never had that experience that some talk about of being asked not to use the word God. And I stand here as a humanist minister and I use the word God—not every Sunday, but not always with caveats, either. I see meaning and power in the Universalist understanding which is written on our altar that God is love.

I think there are ways in which humanism will need to adapt and change. Humanism right now is very tied to the modernist world view and many see the rise of postmodernism as a threat, and I think this is unnecessarily so. I think humanism will adapt and change with postmodernism, but still be recognizable as humanism, and be stronger for it. William R. Murry gives five characteristics he believes a religion for the future must include, and these are ones humanism does include or is changing to include. These five elements are:

First is the affirmation that human beings are an integral part of nature....

The second characteristic follows from the first: A religion for the future will affirm humankind's responsibility to preserve and sustain the natural world.

These are things that humanism, at its best already does, but humanism has been accused of being too focused on the human to the expense of the natural world. He continues:

Third, any viable future religion must take seriously the implications for religion of the remarkable discoveries of the modern natural and human sciences....

Fourth, such a religion will recognize the importance of both reason and reverence...

Finally, the religion of the future must affirm those values that help to make our lives more fully human.⁸

I find it hard to argue with any of these principles for what religion should be in our future, and I also see in humanism if not always the fullest practice of these elements, the potential to live up to them. For this reason, if for no other, I believe humanism should and even must have a place in our religion of Unitarian Universalism as we move forward. Our principles say that we are "Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision."

I think our strength as a faith really does come from our diversity. We are a unique faith, something to be proud of, because we have Christians and humanists who worship together. And that doesn't describe all of us, of course, as we have Buddhists and Pagans and Jews and more. But just the dualism of having the theistic and nontheistic religions together in our church in balance makes us something stronger, unique, and, I believe, ultimately more true to the religious nature of human existence than any other religion out there. We test each other, pull at each other, try each other's patience at times, but because we can continue to worship united in one religion, we have the potential to be that religion which changes the world. We can be a bridge across the other faiths, an example to the world of how to live in peace, and a beacon of hope to a world in pain. Yes, that's a broad statement and a huge mission, but it's what I think we do. Here in Jackson County, it gives us the potential to be a unique place where divisions can come together, where healing can happen. We live this out in little ways and big ways all the time. As Murry might say, we do it with reason and reverence. I would say we do it because we embody the balance, the tao, although we are always in danger of tipping the scales too much to one side or the other. We hold within us the yin and yang, the tension between self and other, between faith and knowledge. We are the place where a new religion has been born, a religion

⁸ Murry 151-152.

that is defined not by creed, but by action, by presence, by our willingness to question. May it ever be so.

So, yes, I am a humanist. I am a humanist because I believe that no matter what our belief, our faith, our hope, we must temper it with reason and experience. I have had mystical experiences that may or may not have been the hand of God at work in my life, but since I cannot ever know I must live in the world of humanity, I must make my decisions using the process of reason. I must accept the rules of humanism which govern the natural world and give me at the same time an ethical and moral framework. I am a humanist because I think and question and wonder, but also because I worship and experience and pray. In the foxholes and in the forests, in the awe and majesty of the moment, I hold myself open to the universe, and to the connections between us, and to my deepest self.

I am a humanist. And I am a Unitarian Universalist.