

Sermon: *The World of Humans and the Sphere of Religion*

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For me, the origins of religion have always seemed pretty logical and easy to understand. But I admit to being hopelessly left-brained and mired in rational and analytical thought. In ancient times there was a lot to fear and many questions that couldn't be answered: Why are we here? What makes the seasons come and go? What controls the sun, the moon, the stars? Why do people from other tribes speak different languages and look different from each other? Where do we go when we die?

In the absence of answers to profound questions, humans developed superstitions, belief in spirits, stories passed along for generations to explain how the world came to be as it is. Different clans and races over time codified their beliefs and customs into formal religions with texts and rituals. And then different brands of religion went to war over who had the true religion.

But what's hard for me to understand is how many ancient beliefs still flourish today in an era of scientific and rational explanations for many of life's mysteries – not all, but many. However, today there is some religion that has grown out of rational thought.

This morning I hope you will bear with me as I try to shed a little light on the origins of humanism within Unitarian Universalism, and to explain the philosophies and aspirations of religious humanism.

Former UUA President John Buehrens writes in "A Chosen Faith" that Unitarian Universalism aspires to a special form of religious community – one in which individuals are never asked to check their minds at the church door, but in which they offer one another the possibility of rediscovering an authentic and personal spirituality. We remind ourselves that how we live does matter, even after we die. We are related, forever, to one another.

Buehrens further states that we only know two things for certain: "I am" and "I will die." Religion is our response. Whether it is spoken or unspoken, conscious or unconscious, inherited or chosen, we all have a religion of some sort or another, for religion is not merely a matter of belief or affiliation. It is a matter of how we choose to live.

I love that concept of the Chosen Faith! Let me repeat: religion is not merely a matter of belief or affiliation -- but rather it is a matter of how we choose to live. I don't need a show of hands to guess that very few of you are here today simply because you were raised Unitarian. You far more likely have made conscious life decisions that have led you here.

How did I get here? I don't have enough time this morning to cover the whole story, but let me give you a brief version. Like many of you, I had an inherited religion. I was raised Catholic. I never considered faith a choice – it was what you were when you were born, like being Irish or Caucasian. In my youth, I saw God as an all-powerful being who monitored my every thought, and determined where I went when I died based on how closely I followed the rituals and rules of the church.

Many of those rules and rituals made little sense to me – Mass was in Latin, the Immaculate Conception was celebrated just 3 weeks before Jesus was born, and why did we have to go to church on New Years Day to celebrate circumcision? Most important, how could a loving God who died for our salvation deny heaven to the majority of humanity that is not Catholic – and even to Catholics not in good standing?

But I largely didn't put much thought into my doubts since I believed religion wasn't a matter of choice – I did as I was told and took it on faith.

At the age of 17, I went off to college in the great North and for the first time experienced some real independence. I continued initially to trudge to Mass every week – quite a commitment for a teen with six 8:00 AM classes Monday through Saturday and then having to walk 1½ miles each way to church on Sunday morning.

And then it happened! My “dawn breaks on Marblehead” moment. In late 1966 came the Pope’s announcement about fish on Fridays! I was stunned! It turns out that after centuries the church admitted the reason for the church decree on fasting from meat on Fridays and during Lent was to help fishermen in the Middle Ages sell more fish!!!

Suddenly all the questions I ever had about religion came rushing forward, and I spent a lot of time that year pondering them and arriving at my own conclusions while walking to and from classes. If they could lie to me about St. Christopher (who got demoted off the dashboard), the date of Jesus’ birth (which was appropriated from pagan tradition), and fish, then what else?

The truths I came to believe were as I stated earlier: that religion began as a response to explain ancient fears about the unknown, but that modern science and reason made most of that doctrine obsolete. What mattered was ethical living which I learned in Kindergarten as the golden rule, and that only humans, not any supernatural being, could effect change in the world. While all religions have a lot in common, what they appear to focus on is the dogma and rituals that separate them and that have ultimately lead to death and oppression of millions.

I didn’t just stop attending Mass, I became an atheist with the intention of never belonging to any religion or church again. I decided I could live an ethical life without all the nonsense. And thus decades went by.

A curious incident occurred many years later involving a very close friend who insisted I had to believe in God (with a capital “G”) because I was active in numerous civic and charitable groups. Surprisingly he’s Catholic. He could not reconcile anyone doing things to help others without get-into-heaven or stay-out-of-hell motivation. How bizarre! Other friends told me I was religious, but just didn’t know it.

Our kids came along and we considered how to address religion with them. Not giving them a choice about it seemed no better than I had had as a child. Eventually I wandered in to Unity Church one day at the suggestion of a friend who thought I might find a supportive community here.

So did I come here and found all the answers laid out for me? Not at all. It took me a while just to figure out what a UU is. That involves a set of principles drawing on several sources, and it requires you to discover your own answers. What I discovered through exploration here was that my seemingly eclectic values, beliefs, and life pretty much defined me as a humanist and, sure enough, I didn't know it.

First, a word about humanists. For a simple definition, I can turn to Kurt Vonnegut, who succinctly described that "being a Humanist means trying to behave decently without expectation of rewards or punishment after you are dead."

I am also talking today primarily about religious humanists, although you may be familiar – or confused – with the term secular humanist as well as several other humanist adjectives. Secular humanists share the same core beliefs as religious humanists but they do so outside any religious faith. The difference has been described as how each spends Sunday morning: the religious humanist at church, the secular humanist with the "New York Times."

So, why do we, as Unitarian Universalists, need to care about humanists? It is within our faith community that the vast majority of religious humanists are found today. William Schultz, former UUA President and Executive Director of Amnesty International, in his book "Making the Manifesto," notes that our UU religious traditions in particular, have been deeply affected by the religious humanist strain, diverse as our theological perspectives may be. Foremost, religious humanism has made it possible for those with radically nontraditional views of religion to find in Unitarian Universalism a comfortable religious home.

But religious humanism is not just a matter of historical curiosity as far as UUs are concerned. After all, 46% of UUs reported in 1998 that they regarded themselves as theologically humanist – more than twice the number who identified themselves with the second-most common perspective, nature-centered spirituality, and far more than the 13% who called themselves theists. From our recent Unity Church Search Committee questionnaire, 39% identified themselves as humanist, atheist, or agnostic. Even those UUs who do not identify with the religious humanist category would be foolish not to realize that they too should pay it tribute, for it provides a set of values that are due honor to this day.

Shultz states, "the truth is that a lot of nonsense passes for religion in this 21st century, as it has in all the preceding centuries. Religious humanism is willing to call a charlatan a charlatan, and while reason is by no means the only vehicle of religious exploration, we abandon it altogether only at our peril.

Religious humanism has its roots deep in antiquity, but I will focus this morning on the movement as it developed in the United States and within Unitarian Universalism. Let's consider the story of religious humanism: a religious movement that emphasized human capabilities, especially the human capacity to reason; that adopted the scientific method to search for truth; and that promoted the rights of humans to develop to their full potential. It is a story of a movement that sought to construct what Rev. John Dietrich called "a religion without God," shifting the focus of religious faith from divinity to humanity. Clergy and journalists, philosophers and scientists banded together, refusing to believe that human beings could not be saved and insisting that they themselves would be the instrument of salvation.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the western world of thought was in the midst of turmoil. Two developments had shaped the intellectual climate. First was the emergence of science as a respected discipline for ascertainment of fact and alteration of the world. The development of science as a vital world force was a simple matter of fact. Louis Pasteur revolutionized hygiene, the Curies discovered radium, and even the laying of the transcontinental cable contributed to the popular conviction that science worked. It provided explanations and improvements where none existed before.

But no scientific proposition occasioned more debate than Charles Darwin's 1859 theory of evolution and natural selection. It is not an exaggeration to say that this conflict influenced the whole tenor of the period. Two camps emerged that characterized the science and religion divide. On the one hand, there were those who took evolution to be the process by which growth and change came about, and on the other, those who, while often accepting the first view, saw evolution as an empirically verifiable manifestation of God. In the early twentieth century, religious humanism would arise out of the former and Protestant modernism out of the latter. Those that didn't accept evolution at all are still emerging today!

Perhaps the paragon of the first view was the English biologist Thomas Henry Huxley, whose importance for religious humanism can hardly be overstated. An ardent advocate of evolution, Huxley was most of all a radically honest man who refused to entertain any belief of which science would not approve. He simply acknowledged he lacked insight in many areas and would have to stand as an agnostic (a term he coined) on many issues of interest to the human mind. Huxley quickly discovered that to honor his convictions, he would have to forgo religious faith. The agnostic was committed first of all to truth, and truth was only that which could be experimentally tested.

Perhaps in no denomination but Unitarianism, with its aversion to creeds and dogma, could such a frankly nontheistic movement as religious humanism have arisen without provoking a schism, and even Unitarianism found itself hard pressed to encompass the new thought. The philosophy of religious humanism made its greatest impact on the Western Unitarian Conference, a branch of the National Unitarian Conference formed in 1852 to promote the faith in the west: west of New England and New York State, that is.

The WUC found itself at odds with the eastern orthodoxy over many of the issues of scientific theism versus Christian theism. In 1886, the National Conference, in an effort to centralize the Unitarian church, adopted a doctrine that affirmed Unitarianism's commitment to

"God and the idea of divine humanity that shines through Christ Jesus."

The majority of the Western Conference refused to adopt this doctrine and instead adopted a resolution reaffirming that WUC fellowship was conditioned on no dogmatic tests. It was not until 1894 that unity of sorts was reestablished on the western front. In the process, the non-dogmatic doctrine of Unitarianism had been firmly established.

In the early 20th century, Religious humanism was forced to struggle, to do battle for its very existence. It was staunchly opposed, even ridiculed by its theistic Unitarian opponents. But in a surprisingly short time, humanism established itself as a fully reputable option within the Unitarian fold.

If that debate seems a remote curiosity from another era, some of you may recall a more recent controversy right here at Unity Church that may illustrate the move from theistic doctrine to non-dogmatic covenanting. If you pull out our Membership Book, you will find emblazoned on the top of each page signed by members:

“In the love of truth and in the spirit of Jesus we unite for the worship of God and the service of man.”

In the early 90's, some in our congregation wanted to become members of Unity Church, but refused to sign the Membership Book under that statement. After considerable debate and a vote of the congregation in 1992, the theistic phrase was replaced on subsequent pages with a more humanist one:

This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.

The developing humanist spirit in the Unitarian church was tragically interrupted in 1914, however, by a war in Europe, the heartland of culture. It was in the midst of the post-war social environment that religious humanism grew up.

The religious humanists of the 1920s were well aware of the theological struggles of the nineteenth century. By the early 1920's, a generation of humanists was emerging that would see the movement into the 1930's and beyond. Concentrated in Chicago – and more specifically at Meadville Theological School – the second generation came under the profound influence of Eustace Hayden, professor at the University of Chicago and a scholar of national renown.

Hayden's principal contribution to religious humanism was to provide the movement with an understanding of religion as a human phenomenon manifested in a variety of forms. Beneath all of the variations in ritual and doctrine was a common goal of all religions: the quest for a satisfying life. Religion needed to assert its partnership with science, to serve as a synthesizing agent of secular concerns, and to provide guiding ethics for science's creation of the satisfactory life.

Hayden's perspective permitted humanists to justify a religion without a theology. When understood properly, he said, religion did not need to involve a relationship with the supernatural, the transcendent, or God.

Whatever his faults, Hayden shaped the thinking of the new generation of religious humanists and molded the movement to his own point of view. He was instrumental in encouraging the humanists most far-reaching and important project: the publishing of a magazine.

Of note, Hayden suggested that old religious language be replaced with franker and more scientifically sophisticated prose. The burden of Hayden's contribution to humanism was, in fact, his contention that humanism could discard the trappings of theological language and still retain its religious character. The "The New Humanist" magazine included a column that served as a clearinghouse and resource for sharing humanist materials, such as Opening Words, hymn lyrics, responsive readings, and the like.

In 2003, a spirited debate about the language we use in our religion erupted in a "language of reverence" controversy within the UUA. The Boston Globe reported at the time:

“Prodded by a new president, a one-time atheist,...the Unitarian Universalist Association is embarking on a freewheeling debate over whether to reverse its decades-long drift away from what the president, Rev. William Sinkford, calls the "language of reverence" and instead begin to "name the holy."

That doesn't mean a full-blown religious revival, but for a church whose members for decades have been more comfortable with humanism than Christianity, Sinkford's words are causing a stir...

Sinkford's advocacy of reverence has sparked a raging debate on a UUA electronic bulletin board and in the movement's 1,010 congregations around the country. At this weekend's convention... there was some audible gasp during Sinkford's opening speech ...when he remarked that "souls are saved one at a time."

If anyone doubts the concern many of us have with traditional religious language, consider the oft-told joke: “why are UUs so bad at singing hymns? It's because they are too busy reading ahead to see if they agree with the next line!” Just ask Dick if there isn't a lot of truth to that.

By the early 1930s, humanism had earned a respectable place in religious thought. The one thing it lacked was a convenient writ. Forest Church writes in "A Chosen Faith," that in 1933, a group of religious humanists, most of whom were from the Chicago area and many of whom were Unitarian, together composed a brief document outlining the basic principles of humanism. It was not designed as an anti-religious statement, but as a testament to the religious spirit as it might best be expressed in our own time. The product was The Humanist Manifesto of 1933.

The word humanism is blasphemy to many religious people even today, more than a half century after this document was composed. Yet the Humanist Manifesto is a profoundly spiritual document. Yes, it rejects superstition, while calling for the exercise of reason in matters of faith, but it also expresses deep commitment to the common good.

Far from being anti-religious, the manifesto proclaimed, "Today our larger understanding of the universe, our scientific achievements, and our deeper appreciation of the kinship of all people, have created a situation which requires a new statement of the means and purposes of religion."

In far more important matters than good manners, but in those as well, God doesn't make us do anything. We are responsible for our own destiny and we are capable of making it better. The signers of the Manifesto wrote "the goal of humanism is a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good. Humanists demand a shared life in a shared world... We assert that humanism will: affirm life rather than deny it; seek to elicit the possibilities of life, not flee from it; and endeavor to establish the conditions of a satisfactory life for all, not merely a few."

The Humanist Manifesto was originally published in 1933. It was seen by its signers as "a desire to make certain affirmations which we believe the facts of our contemporary life demonstrate." Thus it is not surprising that the Manifesto itself has been revised twice. The Humanist Manifesto II was issued in 1973 and the Humanist Manifesto III was issued in 2003.

I will only read selected portions of the 3rd Manifesto:

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

This document is part of an ongoing effort to manifest not what we must believe but a consensus of what we do believe. It is in this sense that we affirm the following:

Knowledge of the world is derived by observation, experimentation, and rational analysis.

Humans are an integral part of nature, the result of unguided evolutionary change.

Ethical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience.

Life's fulfillment emerges from individual participation in the service of humane ideals.

Humans are social by nature and find meaning in relationships, and

Working to benefit society maximizes individual happiness.

It ends by stating: "the responsibility for our lives and the kind of world in which we live is ours and ours alone."

So what can we conclude humanism has brought to Unitarian Universalism? Shultz summarizes in his book on the birth of religious humanism:

As primitive humans encountered the world, they found it complex and threatening. And so, the eternal quest of the ages has been the desire to erect a safe, satisfying way of living on earth. But at some point, humans were confronted with the fact of failure and turned to a world of wishes and ideals, transferring the responsibility for attaining a better life on earth from their shoulders to the realm of the supernatural. They have been plagued ever since by the dualism between the world of humans and the sphere of God.

Humanism reacted against this artificial world and argued that the world of the supernatural and absolute must be rejected, not only because it fails to square with the facts that science reveals but also because it makes humanity feel helpless, impotent, and irresponsible before the world and its future.

Within the Unitarian tradition, humanism inherited the respect for scientific authority nurtured in the late nineteenth century. Reason – which had long been Unitarianism's "saint" – was replaced by human intelligence, and it was a cogent substitution. Humans no longer reasoned *about* nature and reality; by means of intervening intelligence, they now *participated* in their creation.

Humanism is in no sense a passive thought system, staring into space in search of inherent meaning. It conceives of intelligence as active problem solving and of humanity as the executive perpetrator of change. Regardless of whether it is a valid perspective, it has the advantage of assigning to human beings a dignity and elegance they have rarely been allowed before in religious circles.

And now, please join in singing our closing hymn, #318, "*We Would Be One*".