

## Humanists, Humanists, Humanists Are We

In my time in Pennsylvania, I was very involved in interfaith activities with liberal and moderate people of many faiths. One of my favorites was Rev. John Woodcock, who had started his own, non-denominational, liberal Christian Church and was a community leader in issues of racial justice and public education. John and I were talking a few years back — after a very warm interfaith service where Catholics, Muslims, Jews, Protestants, Baha'is, Quakers, and Unitarian Universalists were all able to worship together (one of the best in a long time), and John said to me that he sometimes thought that the largest faith differences are not so much between different faiths as within faiths. Each faith, he said, seems to have a brand that includes and reaches out. Each has a progressive, tolerant, open face, and each faith also seems to have groups within that are rigid, dogmatic, intolerant, and searching for purity, a group that wants to impose orthodoxy. There is a great deal of truth in that. Even within Unitarian Universalism, a faith whose whole spirit seems to speak of tolerance and inclusion, there have been and probably will always be those whose psychology is rigid or dogmatic even though our principles and our core spirit reject such things.

John's observation also got me thinking about how we Unitarian Universalists sometimes stereotype various faiths. When we think about Islam, Catholicism, Methodists, Baptists, Jews, and so on, do we tend to characterize the faiths by those who are conservative, fundamentalist, and dogmatic? Or do we think of the true Catholicism as being the Catholicism of Archbishop Romero or the four religious workers who died for the poor? When we think of Baptists do we think of Jerry Falwell or Jimmy Carter or Martin Luther King? And so on. One of the things I have noticed about Unitarian Universalists who grew up in another faith tradition is that they often rejected it because of the people within it who were rigid and dogmatic AND that they are either unaware of or don't give as much weight to the tolerant, caring, open, strands within their former faith. It may be human nature that we sometimes give undue weight to the negative elements over the positive, but I notice that it happens. In my own case, the really negative experiences I had in my youth in Unitarian Universalism were with dogmatic Humanism. It is not that all or even most Humanists were or are Dogmatic, but those were the ones that caught my attention as a youth and made me wary of Humanism for decades afterwards.

What do I mean by Dogmatic Humanists? They were the people in our Unitarian Fellowship in Corvallis who made fun of Christianity as being a refuge for the frightened and unenlightened. They pretended a knowledge of religion that they did not possess, which came off to me, even as a child, as arrogant. They didn't much like stories and imaginative curricula for their children, but preferred science lessons in the Sunday School. For some, their allergy to the mythic extended to Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. They, like the fundamentalists, "often seemed angry about something" — usually other peoples' religion. They rarely seemed joyful, affirming, hopeful, or optimistic. And although they were not the majority, they tended to rule the roost — censoring those who didn't see things as they did. I remember when I was a young adult, one such gentleman who suggested in a public meeting that I and people like me didn't belong in Unitarian Universalism if we weren't atheists like himself.

In some cases, the dogmatism not only censored theology but art. There was a Puritanical view of the arts, music, poetry, as if only prose were sufficiently tough-minded for the Fundamentalist Rationalism they felt should hold sway. Exposure to this kind of negativity as a young person gave me, for a long time, an aversion to that brand of Unitarian Universalism

that was visceral rather than rational — even though, theologically, I, myself, could well have been described as a Humanist throughout that period of my life. It was only study and an exposure to a different kind of Humanism that made me realize that the Dogmatists of my childhood were not in the past or future mainstream of Religious Humanism, however great their influence was in Fellowships around the country.

What I have come to understand is that, while they may have claimed a place in the tradition of Unitarian Humanism, the folks I grew up with, bless their souls, didn't have much knowledge about either Unitarianism or Religious Humanism. I grew up in a Fellowship. The Sundays were centered on lectures on topics of interest, but rarely on a subject that might give members of the parish, almost all of whom were newcomers to the religion, a sense of the philosophical history of either.

Briefly, for those of you who are new to Unitarian Universalism yourselves, one of the great religious innovations of American Unitarianism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was its hopeful attitude about human beings. Most Christian religions in that era were concerned with sin, hell, and believed in predestination. Humans were hopeless and helpless. The first major Unitarian figure, William Ellery Channing, made the importance of reason in religion and the ability of humans to effect their own destinies and salvation, central to his message and the message of the Unitarian movement. The idea of “self culture,” that human beings could improve their ethical and spiritual well-being through their own disciplined efforts, while a commonplace of American culture today, was a relatively new idea in religion. Channing was the earliest clergyman to popularize it, and it was a central theme of the young American Unitarian Movement. Channing was a Christian, as were Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker, the two other leading thinkers of early Unitarianism. However, in American Unitarianism, the great theological innovation was not so much about the divine as it was about Humanity and our relationship to the divine, to ourselves, and to the world around us.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were attempts within Unitarianism to stray away from Liberal Christianity and some, including Emerson, left Unitarianism behind — forming a free-religion movement, but they gained no traction. Unitarianism was not creedal, but its central statement of “Things Commonly Believed Among Us” suggested that they still saw themselves as very liberal Christians, albeit Christians less interested in worshiping Jesus than in following his example. About Jesus they said: “We revere Jesus, and all holy souls that have taught men truth and righteousness and love, as prophets of religion.”

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, some Unitarians and Universalists had begun to focus their religion almost entirely on the Human and had grown away from the traditional emphasis on the divine. This was a part of a larger religious movement away from the naiveté of pre-scientific religion. Science and the theory of evolution had been having a great impact on the thinking of educated people — throwing educated people into conflict with the traditional religion of previous eras. This resulted in a great liberalization of some forms of Protestantism to what became known as “modernism” — a movement to reconcile Christianity with modern science.

In modernism, evolution, for example, was seen not as a threat to Christianity but a confirmation of the Goodness of God. Evolution was seen as God's way to gradually improve the world. God became less personal and anthropomorphic and more naturalistic. Stories once taken literally were seen as metaphoric.

Among some Unitarian clergy, this modernism was taken a step further. Science and reason became the basis of all religious knowledge, and God, if indeed there even was something that ought to be called God, was in no way supernatural, but rather, naturalistic. These were the clergy who soon began what was to become known as the Religious Humanist movement. In 1933, after several decades of development and dialogue, thirty-four prominent Humanists, nearly half of whom were clergy, mostly Unitarian but also a Universalist and a couple of rabbis, signed the First Humanist Manifesto, laying out their position.

These early Humanists were explicitly religious. Their aim was not to abandon Religion but to transform it. Nor did they reject ritual or ceremony. They did reject the notion that there is a reality beyond the natural world. They lifted up science as the primary means of knowing reality. They were divided on their notion of God, but for those for whom God was important, God was seen as a word for some overarching, natural reality. Those for whom God was still important referred to themselves as “Humanists plus.” Humanism saw humanity and nature as interdependent, but lifted up Humanity as having an important role in speeding up the slow processes of evolution. Early Humanists felt that part of being a Religious Humanist was to help the natural evolutionary process along and help make this a better world for humanity. Many were strong social activists. Passages of the Manifesto had a democratic socialist flavor to them. Knowledge, education, and science were the Humanist means towards a better life and a more fulfilled humanity.

Looking back at our history, it was as if the early Humanists, enamored with science and social science, embraced Channing’s concept of “self culture” but saw this as being achieved not so much through a relationship with the holy, spiritual discipline, education and the example of Jesus, as through education and science alone. Humanism in its early years caused great consternation within Unitarianism; many Unitarians did not welcome Humanists, particularly those Humanists who had no use for God or for theological language. It is an irony of history that the early Religious Humanists were quite clear in their ideal that Unitarianism could be a big tent religion which embraced them along with their Christian and Theistic brothers and sisters. It is ironic because a mere twenty-five years later, those who claimed their legacy were less than tolerant of theological pluralism in congregations in which Humanists had become the majority. For the entire century, the tension between the various theological strands, most particularly between Humanists and Christians, has been an undercurrent in any congregation that has not worked hard in its effort to be pluralistic.

Early Humanism, itself, was far from uniform. Some of the group felt that others were too optimistic and had not dealt with the dark side of human life, of loss and despair, of suffering and evil. Some felt that science was overemphasized and that experience was also a source of truth. Many inside and outside the movement felt that Religious Humanists lacked a well-developed aesthetic sense. The Manifesto itself seemed to demonstrate this, eschewing stories and poetry traditional for religion, in favor of a prosaic, utilitarian format. Even the word “Manifesto” is a bit off-putting. Some Humanists rejected spiritual language and preferred the language of science; others used traditional language, what Rev. Bill Sinkford now calls “the language of reverence” to describe a naturalistic theology.

Humanism was uniform in one particular way: its signers were all well-educated, white, American males. Almost all were either clergy or philosophers. This lack of diversity continued, although a few women entered into the ranks of prominent Humanists by the end of

the century. Still, for a Religious Philosophy that was intended for the uplift of Humanity, it included a very narrow slice of humanity in its foundation. This, in my opinion, has been one of its weaknesses. It is interesting to note that early Humanists were staunch believers in evolution, and thus believed that Humanism itself would need to evolve over time. There have been two more manifestos issued over time, the second in the 1970's, and the third just a few years ago in 2003.

The original Religious Humanists were extremely clear that there was no place for dogmatism within Humanism, because, unlike the orthodox, they felt that religion and religious understanding were not eternal but must constantly evolve. They took seriously the notion that all living things must evolve. It was ironic, therefore, that many in the next generation established an orthodoxy and resisted evolution. Yet, as my friend John pointed out, that happens in every faith group.

So I have had to get over the sins of the orthodox Humanists of my childhood and learn to appreciate and even embrace what this strand of Unitarianism has to offer — just as those who have had a difficult experience with Christian orthodoxy need to take an informed look at all that open-minded Christianity has offered the world. With that look, I realize that Humanism reinvigorated and energized Unitarianism at a time it needed a challenge. It has opened the church doors to a lot of people who otherwise would have had no religious home. It recommitted Unitarianism to a concern with this world. Humanists were certainly not the only social activists, but they gave strong religious backing to involvement in social betterment and social change — to helping evolution along. The Social Activist aspect of Humanism was also challenged in later years, particularly by some prominent Humanists in our movement who saw themselves more as Libertarians than Liberals, and felt that Religious Freedom precluded Social Activism.

As a minister I came to love the practical, down-to-earth aspect of Humanism that attracted a lot of people to our churches who would do the practical down-to-earth tasks that make a church run day by day. The Humanist philosophy that your religion is what you do and how you live has often brought a real energy to our church institutions. You see this often in practical tasks like finance or building and grounds, but you also often see it in taking care of people. A couple from the fellowship I grew up in, two ardent Humanists, the Lemans, are the first to help out in time of trouble. During both of my parents' illnesses, they were at the hospital, marshalling help at home, calling us to let us know when we were needed. My family has jokingly called them the most Christian people we know, but the reality is that they both have a strong Humanist ethic of care which is at the core of their religion and has made them beloved in their community.

Although the original Religious Humanists were, in my opinion, lacking in their understanding of a need for an aesthetic or transcendent aspect of Religion, subsequent Humanists have turned to the Arts in Worship — to Music, to Poetry, to Art, to provide the uplift to the Human spirit that is essential to inspire us. I am particularly enamored by the artistic Humanists. Last, but not least, the Humanist emphasis on education, reason, and thought, while at times it has mistaken the non-rational for the irrational, is a grounding that I not only appreciate but embrace.

A few modern Unitarian-Universalists don't owe a lot to the best of the Humanist movement: to its optimism and hope for the Human Condition, to its willingness to sustain our institutions, to its living their day-to-day lives with care for the larger community, to its social activism, to its belief that evolution in religion is something to be welcomed, to its embrace of the Unitarian love of reason. Yet our lack of understanding of Humanism and its place in our movement has not always been in the best interests of our life together. Unitarian Universalism in its essence eschews orthodoxy, and yet in some churches and especially within our fellowship movement, too many forgot that to be faithful to our charge we must be a church open to all the strands of our tradition: Liberal Christians, Theists, Pagans, Mystics, as well as Humanists. Our diversity is what makes us lively, interesting, and evolving. Unitarian Humanism was not secular Humanism. It was and is Religious Humanism — meaning that it lifts up a higher purpose to our lives, recognizes the need for a communal life and aesthetic, uplifting common experiences.

Religious Humanism was never meant to be a polite term for atheism, although that is what it became for many. It was meant, instead, to be a positive force for the emphasis on human development. To the extent that it fostered religious negativity rather than a positive, affirming message, it betrayed its founders. And, of course, a key mistake in some quarters was a reluctance to evolve and change. Evolution of religion was a primary tenet of Religious Humanism. It was key that it would not look the same today as it did a decade ago, nor the same a decade hence as it does today.

The lively, interesting, strands of Humanism of today are very different in tone, flavor, and presentation than that of thirty years ago. They are more poetic, more artistic, more musical. They speak with the voices of many more kinds of people. They have included experience and intuition with the rational and scientific as ways of knowing our world. They are a bit more humble, more nuanced, more aware of human frailties and limitations.

As for me, I have come to appreciate the Humanism that has made a difference in the lives of the ministers and lay people I have come to admire over the years. I have appreciated greatly the contribution Humanist members have given to the life of every church I have served. I have come to recognize how much that strand of the Unitarian movement has influenced me — even though I trace my own roots more to the Universalists and the Channing Unitarians. Still, my own religion, though rooted there, is very different than that of Channing. My own religious thought and practice have evolved over a lifetime. Perhaps, for me, personally, that is one of the important legacies of Humanism: the metaphor of evolution — the idea that faith and practice are not static but develop and change, that, like any living thing, religion must evolve to survive. It is a reminder to me that as much as I honor and love my religious roots, I must adapt them to today and tomorrow. I must never create my own orthodoxy. I must continuously evolve.