



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“A Humanist Spirituality”

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Centering Thoughts

A true faith appeals to the conscience, heart, sympathy, and common Intelligence of [humanity], and forgets speculative theology. Richard P. Hallowell

Humanism, in all its simplicity, is the only genuine spirituality. Albert Schweitzer

Being human means throwing your whole life on the scales of destiny when need be, all the while rejoicing in every sunny day and every beautiful cloud. Rosa Luxemburg

What I'm asking you to entertain is that there is nothing we need to believe on insufficient evidence in order to have deeply ethical and spiritual lives. Sam Harris

Sermon

To begin this sermon today I wanted a suitable opening or hook to get you interested. So like all people endowed with supreme intelligence, I went to the highest, most reliable, nearly supernatural source: the Google search engine. Hoping to find something humorous I typed in “You could be a humanist if...” And of course, the Google gods came through.

The first search result took me to a site that suggested you could be a humanist if you say “Gesundheit” instead of “God bless you.” Or, you say “Thank goodness” instead of “Thank God.” Maybe you already know if this describes you or not, but if not, the second search result might be more telling.

It took me to a British humanist organization that offered a quiz titled “How much of a humanist are you?” Feeling game, I took the multiple choice quiz. The first prompt said:

Other people matter and should be treated with respect because...

Now pay attention because I'm going to ask you to select one answer as I did. Here are the four choices:

- God created us all in his image.
- We will all be happier if we treat each other well.
- They are people with feelings like mine.
- They are useful to me.

Of these options, I could check two, but the quiz didn't allow me to. If *you* had to pick only one response, which would you pick? I'll repeat the four options. (*repeat above bullets*)

Do you know which one you would select? I chose, 'We would all be happier if we treated each other well'. I also agreed with the statement that other people have feelings like mine, but the common good is more important to me than my shared feelings, though that fact contributes to why I think we would all be happier.

The next prompt said: *The meaning in my life comes from...*

- The pursuit of my goals, ambitions, hobbies, and projects.
- My connections with others, my experiences, and the emotions I feel.
- A higher power, who has a plan for us.
- Nowhere. There is no higher power and life is meaningless.

I won't go through the whole quiz, but these two examples give you an idea of the questions and option variety. It was no surprise to me, and should be no surprise to you, that at the end of the quiz it reported, "We calculate you are 100% humanist." I stand convicted.

<https://humanism.org.uk/humanism/how-humanist-are-you/>

Several years ago, Kendyl Gibbons, a Unitarian Universalist minister in Minneapolis, described humanism in *Quest*, a UU Church of the Larger Fellowship publication. She wrote:

The practice of humanism is about taking responsibility for how we know what we know. It is about affirming that perception and reason and the accumulation of human knowledge and aspiration, fallible though they all are, will be sufficient to guide us in answering the essential questions of life. It is about cherishing a faithful skepticism that is forever open to new information and larger experience, and knowing what kind of a world we intend for our lives to bring into being.

[For humanists] all the questions of human living, large and small, must be answered on the basis of human knowledge, human reason, and human experience. We can never give away our responsibility for finding answers that make sense to us. If our lives are not satisfying, we must not whine to some powerful figure whose rules we have followed in the expectation of being rewarded; rather, we must discover the path to fulfillment by our own process of exploration, by the evidence of our own observation. [CLF *Quest*, March 2010, page 3-4]

I agree with Rev. Gibbons that the path to fulfillment is through our own process of exploration. It explains what we mean by Unitarian Universalism's 'Living Tradition'. Our theology today may not be the same tomorrow. If religion is a human construct, then it can change as our lives change. Revelation is not sealed.

But what Rev. Gibbons didn't address, nor did the online quiz, was the part of humanism that for me is religious. I don't believe religious humanism is an oxymoron, an impossible pairing.

Although secular and religious humanism share the same values, according to the Rev. William R. Murry, UU author of the book *Reason and Reverence* –

[R]eligious humanism emphasizes the importance of communities that affirm, support, and encourage these values through preaching, teaching, caring for one another, and celebrating life and life's passages together. . . . Religious humanism has a different feel or quality than secular humanism because it is more open to mystery and more likely to respond with reverence and gratitude at the wonder of being alive." [Murry, page 1-2] He further describes religious humanism as a "life stance that exults in being alive in this unimaginatively vast and breathtakingly beautiful universe and that finds joy and satisfaction in contributing to human betterment . . . Religious humanism speaks to the heart and the soul, not just the intellect." [Murry, page xvi-xvii]

I believe religious humanism forms the foundation of Unitarian Universalism. That is not to say there are no theists or supernaturalists among us. We include people who hold a belief in a mysterious or transcendent power, and some will name this God. But religious humanism is our common shared ground. It guides our corporate worship, our desire for social justice and a better world, our compassionate care for one another, and our ongoing interest in expanding our minds, hearts, and spirits. Unitarian Universalism as a whole focuses on *this* world and what is of practical benefit to us as individuals and to the greater good. Collectively we do not focus on how to live in a way that glorifies a god or gets us entry into a heavenly realm upon our death. Individually, some may do that. We do not limit what you can believe as long as it falls within our ethical guides, our Seven Principles.

Unitarian Universalism has not always been this way. True to our living tradition, we were liberal theists in the 17- and 1800s, humanistic in the early to late 1900s, and from the late 1900s through today, we have been shifting again, this time towards a more expansive humanism that includes theistic humanism. That, too, is not an oxymoron.

In the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) report *Engaging Our Theology*, survey responses from people in our congregations indicated many UUs described themselves as theists, but they defined their theism in natural – not supernatural – terms, such as the natural energy or creative power of the universe, the immanent force for good in the world, Love, or just plain Mystery. Pantheists who believe in many gods and panentheists who believe god or the divine is in everything fell into this category, too. Very few described a separate, conscious being who intentionally brought the world into existence and is active in the world today.

What Murry describes as an embrace of reason and reverence in religious humanism contributed to the use of more spiritual and religious language in our Sunday morning services. Though some have not welcomed this shift, words like worship, spirituality, and even God are more prevalent among us than they were thirty years ago. Though a comfort for some, the discomfort it's created among others remains a challenge. At the least, it requires us to be very clear about what we mean by these words, and to be as inclusive as possible in our services by using a variety of words to describe what is so often indescribable.

Our differences of opinion concerning how far science, reason and religion can blend, leads some to suggest that Unitarian Universalism has lost its way. But I believe, and our Fifth Source affirms, that reason and scientific proof-tests can become idolatries. I believe we cannot let

humanism become a creedal test anymore than we can let theism. If we make the claim that there is no single truth for all people in all places and for all time, then I cannot justify excluding those who don't identify as humanists from our congregations.

In recent years a criticism of humanism has caused me to shift my own religious label or identity, despite the results of that online survey. Humanism is all about humanity. Yet we do not live in a humans-only world. We are interconnected and interdependent with *all* that exists. We are not alone on this planet and acting as if it existed for us alone has led to many devastating environmental problems.

To move humanity out of the center of our theology, much like Copernicus moved Earth out of the center of the solar system, Murry proposes the term humanistic religious naturalism. Humanistic becomes an adjective of natural religion. He believes naturalism without the humanistic modifier is inadequate because nature is morally neutral and without meaning. Humanism brings our commitment to respect and dignity of all beings and our commitment to justice into natural religion. Together, they give us a grounding to create the beloved community. If we want peace, we must be peaceful. If we want justice, we must be just. If we want compassion, we must be compassionate. Ours *is* a religion of the hands, the heart, the mind, and yes, even the spirit.

Let me close by coming back to the Norwegian folktale I shared with you earlier (“The Ash Lad Who Had an Eating Contest with the Troll,” from the collection of Jørgen Moe). Although trolls are mythological and no humanist believes in them, the story illustrates that even the littlest among us has the capacity to do great things. We can defeat the ogres, the trolls, and the very human demons that try to hurt or destroy our world. We have the wits, the knowledge, and the skills. We simply need the will to use them for good. As Thomas Edison once said, “If we did all the things we are capable of doing, we would literally astound ourselves.”

Thank goodness, thank the universe, thank the divine, and thank *you* for using your hands, hearts, minds, and spirits to make the beloved community here and now. May we continue to do so together, even when our theologies differ. May it always be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Describe the level of importance reason and rationality hold in your theology or world view.
2. When did learning something new impact your religious thinking, faith or beliefs? Share.
3. How do reason and emotion interact in your faith? Share how they support/conflict each other.
4. As your knowledge about the world grows, are you led to more or less awe?