

**Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church--UU**  
**“Naturalism and Deism**  
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**Introduction**

Today will be my last sermon before leaving this afternoon for the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association in Salt Lake City, Utah. The headlines in the Salt Lake City newspaper should read, “Unitarian Universalist meet the Mormons.” It would actually be a very interesting dialogue.

After the General Assembly I will take two weeks vacation, then off to the Summer Institute (SUUSI) at Radford University. I will return to Charlottesville the end of July. I see today’s sermon as the beginning of a series on UU theologies. Next month I will look at Mary and the Holy Grail. In August I will discuss the theology of Spinoza. Later, I will look at Buddhism, Humanism, Paganism and UU Christianity, especially that in Transylvania, where Unitarianism was founded.

What we will learn from Humanism is that we should approach theology with an open mind. The Humanist Manifesto II, written just before I became a Unitarian Universalist minister in 1973, was a credo I could affirm with gusto. It said:

We are responsible for what we are or will be. Let us work together for a humane world by means commensurate with human ends. Destructive ideological differences. . . should be overcome. Let us call for an end to terror and hatred. We will survive and prosper only in a world of shared human values. We can initiate new directions for humankind. . . It is a classical vision; we can now give it new vitality. Humanism thus interpreted is a moral force that has time on its side. We believe that humankind has the potential intelligence, good will, and cooperative skill to implement this commitment in the decades ahead.

I want to claim this humanistic faith as part of my faith today. But I also choose to affirm other paths while I affirm humanism. Some of you may have felt that humanism is not enough. It may be too cold and analytical. Some may even choose a belief in a life force that is personal, that knows your inner thoughts, cares for you, protects against evil, heals you when you are sick, tempted, anxious, in grief or depressed. You may want to call this life force God, Yahweh, Allah, or Gaea. We, Unitarian Universalists, affirm many views of God.

**Historical Perspectives**

Allow me to give historical perspectives. The original Unitarians and Universalists were theists. Both denominations questioned the extreme developments in Calvinist theology. In fact the basic positions of Unitarianism and Universalism have been: The unity of God, the benevolent deity, the humanity of Jesus, the inevitable salvation of all persons, emphasis on reason and free will, and justification by works are directly opposite of the basic views of Calvinistic theology which are a sovereign judging God, the divinity of Jesus, and eternal damnation.

The original Unitarians and Universalists were influenced by the the natural philosophers, the renaissance enlightenment thinkers who revived the study of the physical processes of the universe, first of the heavens with Copernicus, Galileo and Kepler. They blended together facts with loose observations. Then you have Telesio, Bruno, and Campanella who in the 16th century applied these tendencies to religion, and they were persecuted by the Inquisition. Bruno, the Dominican Monk, influenced by Copernicus was a good Unitarian Universalist before his time: He believed the universe was a harmonious unity.

Later, you have the most noted natural philosophers in England, Newton and Locke being the most well known. They believed God is known through the principles of natural reason. Locke said our experience of the natural world is the primary source of all knowledge, ordered by our rational faculties. What was most radical was his notion that even the creator is known through our experience and reason.

What we often forget is that Locke still believed in revelation--but that revelation through Scriptures is not contrary but in addition to or above reason. The natural theologians argued that natural religion is the basis

for revealed religion. Religion without reason is incomprehensible.

It is this philosophical debate that led to the birth of Unitarian Universalism in the 18th century. Joseph Priestley in England, and William Ellery Charming in the United States were the products of this naturalistic theology. The problem is when you change the majority religious viewpoint of a period you are labeled atheistic. Unitarian Universalists are often viewed as rejecting a belief in God. The first Christians were called athiests because they tried to change the traditional view of God. The Unitarians were called atheists because they did not accept the Trinity. In reality they were monotheists. They emphasized a belief in one God--not three as they perceived the trinity.

During the 16th century in Transylvania and Poland there were those who wanted to return to this idea of one God not three and they were called heretics. Then in England and America in the 18th century there were liberal Protestants who returned to again to this idea. After 1819 they accepted the label Unitarians. Universalism spread in New England and the Mid-Atlantic States some forty years earlier. A phrase many people used and some of the Unitarians accepted was the phrase: natural theists. As I will say in two weeks, there are some Unitarian Universalists who do not accept this label. They prefer to be viewed as Christians, not naturalists. Others prefer to be called humanists. I believe that many of us today are comfortable with the word naturalist, and some natural theist.

### **Deism**

The other theological position espoused by some Unitarian Universalists is that of Deism. Before I talk about this view, I must make it clear the early Unitarians and Universalists were not Deists. This is a common misconception. Yes, a minority were, but the majority were not. Even Wikipedia gets it wrong. They claim that Unitarianism and Universalism emerged from Deism. The truth is that Unitarianism and Universalism emerged from Calvinism, though influenced by Deism and the Enlightenment.

The majority of Unitarians and Universalists felt their view of religion was the true form of Christianity. The Deists clearly did not consider themselves Christian. To say that Unitarians and Universalists in the beginning were Deists is like calling all Unitarian Universalists today Pagans. Yes, our tent is wide enough to include paganism, but not all UUs are comfortable with that label.

The first Unitarians and Universalists were being accused of being heretics because they did not affirm the creeds of the church, especially the Nicene Creed that was approved in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. They preferred to return to the period before the Council of Nicea when there was more tolerance of different views. They especially wanted to return to the more simple rites of the early church before the doctrines of the Trinity and Eternal Punishment were set in stone by the Roman Church.

In order to convince others of their views, the first Unitarians and Universalists held on to the major doctrines of the church, i.e. God as Father, revelation through Scriptures (but also based on reason), Jesus as Son of God, and Eternal Life but not Eternal punishment. As part of their defense, they separated themselves from the Deists. Though they were viewed as radicals, in reality they were moderates. Their goal was to moderate the extreme views of Calvinism.

Christians often talk about the religion of the founders of America. We think they are referring to Washington, Adams, Madison and Monroe. They are not. They are talking about the puritans, not the enlightenment founders. The founding Presidents were Deists of different sorts, not all alike, but having the same basic assumptions. In a moment I will outline those basic assumptions. In the fall I will preach a sermon comparing the views of the early Presidents, then will focus on Thomas Jefferson. I hope to initiate a conversation about the name of this church. Today I choose to focus on Deism in general.

I have a feeling many of you are comfortable with the deist philosophy. The word Deism comes from two root words both meaning the same thing. The first part comes from the Latin word, *deus*, means god. The second part comes from the Greek work, *theism*, which also means god. So Deism literally translates as god-god. It is a redundancy. Unlike atheists, deists believe in God, in one God, creator of the universe. The original Deists as moderates between the orthodox and atheists who rejected any notion of God. M. Paul Hazard reached this conclusion when he described the Deists, "As rationalists with nostalgia for religion." Basid Willey writes they were philosophers "who had allowed the spirit of the age to separate them from orthodoxy, but who like to believe that the slope they had started was not slippery enough to lead them to

atheism.”

A major argument through the history of Christianity has been that if you allow the heretics a little disbelief, they may abandon Christianity altogether. To be honest, this did happen with the advent of humanism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Emerson opened the door and many humanists walked through it. This was not true for the Deists. Webster defines deism as,

A rationalistic movement of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries whose adherents generally subscribed to a natural religion based on human reason and morality, on the belief in one God who after creating the world and the laws governing it refrained from interfering with the operation of those laws, and on the rejection of every kind of supernatural intervention to human affairs.

My favorite definition of Deism comes from Thomas Paine in his classic work, *The Age of Reason*. It reminds me of the joke: What does a Unitarian believe? In one God, at most. Paine wrote:

I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life. I believe in the equality of man and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow-creatures happy.

How could you object to this simple philosophy: One God; no more; hoped for happiness beyond this life; the equality of all persons; doing justice; loving mercy, and making others happy.

### **Critique**

What is the problem with this philosophy? Christians would respond by saying: How could a just and loving God create a world and not care about it? Many people want a God, whether male or female, who responds to the situations in which we humans find ourselves. They prefer a God is more than cause and effect, the natural forces of life. Most Christians, including Unitarians and Universalist, at least historically, see God as a loving and just God. Most Deists were comfortable with God as creator but not necessarily protector.

Emerson, the second generation Unitarian, preferred both. He saw God as a living force in the universe that included nature, but also human nature. He upset both the orthodox and the first generation of Unitarians with his concept of the divinity of every human soul. Theodore Parker, also a transcendentalist with Emerson, saw God as both male and female. Emerson and Parker did exactly what the orthodox feared—continued to chip away at the basic theological assumptions of traditional Christianity.

Deism carries with it other troublesome aspects, at least to orthodox Christians. These are:

- A rejection of revelation in favor of reason, and with this a change in the view of the Bible, more of a myth and metaphor and not literally true. This resulted in a rejection of miracles.
- A belief in Jesus as a human being and not a God. This is where Unitarians, and most Universalists agree with the Deists.
- With the naturalists, the Deists saw God as ever-changing, not static.
- Many Deists also rejected a future heaven and hell. They saw heaven and hell on earth.
- Finally, many of the Deists were also anti-clerical. We will find this to be the case with Thomas Jefferson. Like their forerunners during the Reformation, the Deists wanted to decrease the power of the clergy. This would ultimately end in the separation of Church and State, something the established churches rightly feared. Power is not given up easily.

### **Conclusions**

I have outlined here a summary of the history of Naturalism and Deism. What about today? What conclusions do I reach today. First, I consider both Naturalism and Deism as important historical movements which are part of our Unitarian Universalist history. The principles of rationalism became a part of humanism, affirming the scientific method, religion as myth and metaphor and not literal history or science.

As we learned last week, Unitarians and Universalists around the world, have different views of

creation, but this does not separate us from them. We are brothers and sisters with common purpose and principles. Most of us are quite comfortable with the conclusions of science, history, biblical criticism, and prefer theology to be expressed in the language of poetry and myth. We can admire Copernicus, Galileo and Einstein, as well as Carl Sagan and Joseph Campbell.

With the Deists and the original Unitarians and Universalists I want to affirm a belief in one God by many names, the importance of virtue and piety, the need for repentance of our wrongdoings, and the rewards for living a good life. I also believe in the importance of worship, but I am not sure it is for God as much as it is for us.

There are two main questions remaining with the deist philosophy:

1. What is the nature of humanity? Deism does not answer this question. It was left for humanism to struggle with this in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I will deal with this in a sermon on humanism this fall.
2. Second, is the question of the expansion of human knowledge beyond what we know. For some this may fall under the category of miracles. However we answer the question of miracles, it continues to be the role of religion to help us humans deal with injury, illnesses, inevitable death, and human separation. Science cannot and should not take this away from religion.

In conclusion, I want us to honor the Deists and the Naturalists for their contribution to science and religion. Unlike most of the religions of our day and throughout history, let us look to nature and science for guidance through this life. I close with the words of Rachel Carson who is quoted on the World Pantheism website. This quote will link us with the God of Spinoza which will be my topic in August:

Those who dwell . . . among the beauties and mysteries of the earth are never alone or weary of life. .  
 .Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction.

So may it be. Amen.