

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist
“The Many Faces of Humanism”
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Introduction

It says in our Purposes and Principles: "The Living Tradition which we share draws from many sources." This year the Children's Religious Education Program is studying two of these sources: the humanist and the earth-centered traditions. Today I will focus on humanism.

I confess that humanism is the primary source of my belief. I don't know how many of you claim a humanistic faith today, but I predict that all of you have been influenced by it.

Definition of Humanism

First, let me define what I mean by humanism. Humanism has had a long journey. It is indeed a path that has taken over five hundred years. Contemporary humanism is a synthesis of many philosophical, scientific and religious movements including the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, naturalism, democracy, materialism, rationalism, civil libertarianism, ethical culture, Unitarian Universalism, liberal Judaism, and secular humanism. Humanism is a belief in this life, in human goodness, and claims that in order for progress to occur human cooperation is necessary.

If you claim the path of humanism today you probably believe in one or more of these philosophical or religious movements. I would go so far as to say that the 20th century for Unitarian Universalists will be viewed by historians as a coming to grips with the tide of humanism that was begun in the 19th century and flowered during the first half of the 20th century.

If I had time this morning I would show how the Transcendentalists of the 19th century, led by Unitarian minister, Ralph Waldo Emerson, paved the way for the humanism that would follow. David Robinson, the author of, The Unitarians and the Universalists, sees the birth of humanism in our movement in the struggle over our Christian roots at the end of the 19th century. He writes that the supernatural foundation of early Unitarianism was being eroded by a naturalistic approach. I quote:

A "God" that could be thought of as "that Love with which our souls commune" was not necessarily a supernatural or transcendent being or even a being at all. God might be thought of simply as a name or symbol for the aspiring religious sensibility of humanity. . . more precisely as an expression of the human personality itself, and religion might be redefined as a purely human enterprise. Such was the drift of thought in the Humanist presence in Unitarianism, the denomination's "most vital and distinctive theological movement since Transcendentalism." (p. 143)

I don't mean to say this morning that all Unitarian Universalists are humanists or that we are the originators of the humanist movement. This is far from the case. Humanism would put us on the same path philosophically as the Ethical Culture movement founded by Felix Adler in New York toward the end of the 19th century. Our affinity with humanism would bring us close to this movement, with many of our ministers and their leaders crossing denominational lines. The most famous being Lester Mondale, the half-brother of U.S. Senator, and Vice President, and Presidential candidate Walter Mondale.

The biggest struggle of the 20th century in the area of religion and philosophy was the humanist struggle. It has been the struggle of education as well. It is the struggle between knowledge and irrational belief. It was the same struggle of the Enlightenment period. Ralph Perry concludes:

There is the same confidence in our liberated intellect, the same greed for learning, the same worship of the intellect. (p. 9, "The Humanity of Man").

Humanism is indeed a broad philosophical position, including people as diverse in their theology as Thomas Jefferson and Pope John Paul II. Pope John Paul who was pontiff from 1978-2005, and has been called a humanist in the traditional sense: a believer in the Italian Renaissance--a man with a breadth of knowledge.

He wrote that faith and reason must be supportive of each other, had a concern for the working population, for the dignity of women and concluded that freedom depends on truth. These are all humanistic positions.

Humanist Manifesto I and I

Early in the century humanism became first and foremost a rejection of the supernatural. I recommend that each of you read the Humanist Manifesto, written in 1933. The fifth statement in that manifesto, signed by many famous scientists, and many Unitarian ministers said:

Humanism asserts that the nature of the universe depicted by modern science makes unacceptable any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values. . . Religion must formulate its hopes and plans in the light of the scientific spirit and method.

By making the Manifesto a part of our history, our denomination would be viewed by many as no longer a religion but a philosophy. Without a supernatural God how could we now claim to be religious?

This is where I enter the picture. The year was 1973. I had followed the path of humanism within the Methodist church. I could no longer pray to a supernatural God. Emerson, and the Transcendentalists, had taught me that divinity was within humans and nature, not outside of nature. Like the humanists I believed that the time had passed for theism. I had claimed with many theologians of the 1960's that God as "he" was dead. The "he" part of that statement is important.

With the 9th statement of the humanist manifesto I could say:

In place of the old attitudes involved in worship and prayer the humanist finds his religious emotions expressed in a heightened sense of personal life and in a cooperative effort to promote social well-being.

The Manifesto also sought to "establish the conditions of a satisfactory life for all, not merely for a few." Based on this philosophy it was critical of some of the results of capitalism. It concluded:

The humanists are firmly convinced that existing acquisitive and profit-motivated society has shown itself to be inadequate and that a radical change in methods, controls, and motives must be established to the end that the equitable distribution of the means of life be possible.

Maybe the Humanist Manifesto should be taught in business schools today.

The "Manifesto" was much more than an economic doctrine to me. It was a theological and ethical statement. With this "Manifesto" I was ready to

- a) Affirm life rather than deny it;
- b) Seek to elicit the possibilities of life, not flee from it; and
- c) Endeavor to establish the conditions of a satisfactory life for all,
not merely for the few.

This statement written in 1933 would cause a storm if not within all the religions of our nation, at least within our denomination. The next forty years would include a debate between the humanists and the theists of our movement. The theists were those who affirmed our past and the humanists were those who pointed us toward the future.

In 1973 I started preaching in Boca Raton, Florida. My predecessor would be one of the leading writers of humanist thought in the Unitarian movement: Robert Terry Weston. The man that would first tell me about Unitarianism, Bill Gold, minister in Richmond, was already known for being one of the most strident and anti-religious humanist of our movement. Some have called him a "fundamentalist humanist."

Not long after I arrived in Boca Raton a second Humanist Manifesto was already being printed and was on its way to every Unitarian minister across the country. They were asking for ministers and academicians to

sign Humanist Manifesto II. When I received my copy, I thought heaven had come to earth. I couldn't say God was now on our side, but I wanted to.

The new Manifesto was an extension of the first, but it was clear that something had occurred in the 40 years since humanists signed Manifesto I. Listen to this paragraph:

Many kinds of humanism exist in the contemporary world. The varieties and emphases of naturalistic humanism include "scientific," "ethical," "democratic," "religious," and "Marxist" humanism. Free thought, atheism, agnosticism, skepticism, deism, rationalism, ethical culture, and liberal religion all claim to be heir to the humanist tradition. Humanism traces its roots from ancient China, classical Greece and Rome, through the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, to the scientific revolution of the modern world.

Now here is the most revealing statement:

But views that merely reject theism are not equivalent to humanism. They lack commitment to the positive belief in the possibilities of human progress and to the values central to it. Many within religious groups, believing in the future of humanism, now claim humanist credentials. Humanism is an ethical process through which we all can move, above and beyond the divisive particulars, heroic personalities, dogmatic creeds, and ritual customs of past religions or their mere negation.

The humanists of the 1970s were quite clearly different from the humanists of the 1930s. Their preface now read:

We affirm a set of common principles that can serve as a basis for united action--positive principles relevant to the present human condition.

The new humanism was also looking beyond humans and the earth. They were looking at what Carl Sagan would make popular: "The Cosmos." The new manifesto with 20 years passed since World War II was looking for "a vision of hope, a direction for satisfying survival."

Conclusions

I immediately signed this Manifesto and returned it to Edwin Wilson, Unitarian minister, and leader of the humanist movement. I claimed the path of humanism and was proud of it. With this manifesto I was ready to affirm:

The preciousness and dignity of the individual person.
The importance of protecting human liberties, a fair judicial process, artistic, scientific, religious and cultural freedom.

I also affirmed the democratic process and opposed totalitarianism, separation of church and state, the end of discrimination, sexism, and racism, an improved social condition for all. I affirmed the end of nationalism and the beginning of a new world community which would abhor violence and force. This new world order would take advantage of new technologies and scientific discoveries.

Behind this new Manifesto was a new theme. Where the first Manifesto was strident and divisive, the second recognized the need for reconciliation based on the old reason with a new compassion. Humanism in this manifesto means that what is to be done will have to be done by us. We can't look to transcendent beings for our salvation. This was the common thread with the humanism of the past.

I will conclude with a part of the final paragraph of Humanist Manifesto. As I read this statement think of our President and the role he would like to play in the world. It also fits the goals of former pontiff, John Paul II. The theology may be different, and our ethical and moral statements would diverge, but the

humanitarian foundation is there. This is also a statement that drives some radical talk show hosts and super-patriots crazy. I quote from the Manifesto II:

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 among communism, capitalism, socialism, conservatism, liberalism, and radicalism 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; ancient rivalries can be superseded by broad-based cooperative efforts. . . What more daring a goal for humankind than for each person to become in ideal as well as practice, a citizen of a world community. 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.

To that I dare say: "Amen.". The path of humanism is alive and well. Some would argue, and I agree, that the "Manifesto" needs updating. Issues such as the environment, climate change, and marriage equality should be added. The dangers of sexual abuse could have more emphasis. There is also a spiritual nature to human beings which needs to be affirmed more than classical humanism avows.

The American Humanist Association acknowledged this need in 2003 when they rewrote the Manifesto adding words like diversity, global ecosystem, finding wonder and awe, comfort in times of want, interdependence, enjoyed of the good life, and sustainability. Like the earth, humanism continues to evolve. As Unitarian Universalists we claim many sources. Humanism continues to be an important source to many of us.