

First UU Church of Berks
UU Source 5: Humanism
Rev. Sandra Fees
March 30, 2008



A few years ago I gave a presentation on humanism to a church men's group. My talk covered the history of humanism and its tenets. I described the role of reason and science in humanism and how it informs our faith.

I reflected on the relational emphasis of humanism. Humanism advocates respect for all humans and advances humanitarian work in support of that perspective. We are responsible, urges humanism, for what we do and for each other. The ability to create the world we want for ourselves and for others is in our hands, at least in part.

I also shared my own theology, which I described to the group as naturalistic theism. I knew I was in a predominately humanist group. When I said "theism" a few eyebrows went up.

But I proceeded to describe my understanding of God. I explained how I see God as being part of the natural world, not separate from it, and not a supernatural entity. More like the Force in Star Wars than any traditional understanding of God.

I remember well one of the men raising his hand and telling me how he describes himself as a religious humanist. He added that he could readily find sympathy with my own theological description. It didn't seem to him to be so far from his own. This didn't surprise me that much. I still don't describe myself as a humanist. Yet I find I am in fundamental agreement with nearly all the values, ethics, and goals of humanism.

Today's service and sermon are focused on humanism and its contribution to our faith and to our individual religious explorations. A few weeks ago we began a series of sermons on the six Unitarian Universalist sources. We paused for a service on the Ten Commandments and for Easter. Today we pick up once again on the sources.

For those who have missed any of the services in the series, let me recap ever so briefly. Even those who caught them all might appreciate a quick review. We began with direct experience of mystery and wonder. Personal experience is a hallmark of our faith and stands in contrast to one that is strictly doctrinal or creedal. We trust our own experience of the sacred.

We next reflected on the role of prophetic women and men in our own lives. We considered how prophets challenge us to live lives informed by love, compassion, and justice, and how we ourselves can be prophetic. The third source, world religions, offers us the wisdom and inspiration of cultures and religions all over the world. From them, we can be inspired ethically and spiritually.

The fourth source is rooted in love. We explored the Jewish and Christian teachings that call on us to love God and neighbor. And we reflected on examples in our lives of how we have been a loving neighbor ourselves.

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This brings us to the fifth source: “Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.”

Let me share a bit of history regarding humanism as it relates to our movement. The history helps us understand how and why humanism came to be regarded as one of our six sources.

Religious humanism had its roots in the Greek humanism of the fifth century before the Christian era, as well as in the Renaissance and Nietzschean philosophy. But it first emerged in our Unitarian churches during the 1920s.

Revs. John Dietrich and Curtis Reese began preaching about humanism. Dietrich dubbed it a “religion without God” in one of his sermons. Both Dietrich and Reese preached about human capability. They focused on the role of reason and science. They stressed ethical religion. They advocated the role of humans in taking responsibility for their own lives and for the kind of world in which we live.

They preached a religion focused not on our relationship to divinity – on what is the vertical relationship between human and deity – but instead on our relationship to humankind – on the horizontal human to human dimension. (“Our Humanist Legacy,” UU World, November/December 2003, William Schulz)

Ultimately, Dietrich concluded, “one does not need to believe in God in order to be religious.” (American Religious Humanism, Mason Olds) This clearly challenged central normative doctrines of traditional Western religion. There were examples of non-theistic traditions in Eastern religion – early Buddhism and Confucianism.

As you might imagine, this non-theistic philosophy was controversial in the West, even among Unitarians. Among the Unitarians, humanism was understood largely in contrast to theism. And the merits of humanism were debated in relation to theism for over a decade.

The debate eventually subsided. In 1933, a group of 34 individuals penned The Humanist Manifesto. The document was substantially rooted in Unitarianism. Of any Western religion it was the one, perhaps the only one, in which humanism could find a home. The original signers included 15 Unitarian ministers and a Universalist.

The goal of humanism, according to the Manifesto, was “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.” (American Religious Humanism) The Manifesto has since been revised. In 2003 – 70 years later – a third version was signed. It is shorter than the original and advances broad themes.

What seems so striking to me about humanism is that while it was initially a radical religious position – so much so that some weren’t even sure it could rightly be considered a religion at all - today it has become so widespread in our culture and even among religious people that we tend to take it for granted.

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It serves as a kind of philosophical backdrop for individuals across the theological spectrum. UU minister Kendyl Gibbons, one of the signers of the 2003 Humanist Manifesto, considers humanism foundational to much of liberal religion.

She said, “Even UUs who identify with Christianity or Buddhism essentially endorse much or all of the humanist position.” (“New manifesto for humanists 3rd in 70 years,” UU World, July/August 2003)

In 2004, this congregation did a survey which included a question about religious orientation. Individuals could check one or two of the following categories: Humanism, Earth-centered spirituality, goddess/feminist spirituality, eclectic, Christianity, mysticism, agnosticism, theism, atheism, Judaism, Eastern religion, or other.

At that time, humanism was selected by the largest percentage of the respondents - 40 percent. Eclectic received 30 percent, Christianity 22 percent, and theism 15 percent. Earth-centered, agnosticism, and atheism all received 14 percent.

Humanism has had a strong role in our movement ever since those early decades of the 1900s. And it has had a tremendous impact on the thinking and lives of people all over the world and certainly on Unitarian Universalists.

Humanism informs my own religious life in a number of important ways. Like Unitarians and Universalists throughout our history, I have a deep and abiding appreciation for the role of the critical mind in religious matters.

We are a church of reason. Reason has from our earliest days as a religion been integral to our faith. We are never asked to check our minds at the door. (Our Chosen Faith, “Mind and Spirit,” John Buehrens)

One of the reasons I left the faith of my childhood was precisely because it was unable to adequately address the questions and curiosity of my young mind. I wanted a faith strong and practical enough to own up to discrepancies and uncertainties. Unitarian Universalism offers that to me.

I don't need to worry that my questions will be too challenging or out of bounds. Knowledge, reason, science, rationality – these are not to be feared. They are integral to the thinking person's way of doing religion.

As the Humanist Manifesto makes so clear, “Knowledge of the world is derived by observation, experimentation, and rational analysis.” For most of us, science is the best method or at least one of the best methods for acquiring knowledge and truth. Science and religion are partners in the liberal church not enemies.

Science can enrich our religious experience. The discoveries of science can and do bring new meaning to our lives. The discoveries of science, for example, have taught us that we are indeed

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made of stardust. We are all of us connected to each other. This interdependence has become not only a poetic idea but a reality borne out by scientific knowledge.

Consider the numerous examples of scientists among our UU ranks. There is Maria Mitchell, the first important woman astronomer of the 19th century and African American inventor Lewis Howard Latimer who worked with Thomas Edison. They are just a few of our distinguished scientists. (Our Chosen Faith, "Mind and Spirit," John Buehrens)

For me, reason and science have provided a counterbalance to the extremes of supernaturalism. They help to correct the excesses of fundamentalism. And they ensure a practical faith, in which the mind and spirit are balanced.

Another significant aspect of humanism for me is moral work, the work of conscience and justice-seeking. Part of the reason I became a minister was that I was called to work to help further people's participation in creating meaning and purpose in their lives.

Obviously ordained ministry is not the only way to be committed to the betterment of society. Many of you do this through your work lives and also in your volunteer efforts through church and the community.

Humanism affirms human responsibility for making the world a better place – for ourselves and for others. The world is made better, and worse, by human not divine hands. That means we have a special role to nurture and heal the world, to end suffering when we can, and to approach life with a spirit of generosity and compassion.

This focus is an outward one turned toward transforming the world. Humanism teaches me to strive to benefit society. To me, this means giving priority to improving life for everyone here and now rather than harkening to another life after this one.

We owe a debt of gratitude to humanism for its many contributions to our faith. It is deeply relational, deeply compassionate, and deeply concerned for the well-being of all humans.

I encourage each of you to consider how this source is informing your faith and your everyday life. What role does science, reason, and the mind play in your religious life? Are you embracing your own capacity to build a world in which we can all share in the benefits and resources? Do you strive for a life of mutual care and compassion?

Let us each find in this source the impetus to renew our concern for the well being of all people. May it encourage us to hold up a vision of human progress toward our ideals. May we ever strive together to build the common good.

Amen.