

Thank God for Humanism

John L. Saxon

I

In my first sermon here at UUFR, I told you the story of how, as the result of an encounter with a Buddhist on a bicycle, I became a teenaged Universalist without even knowing what a Universalist was.

Today, I'm going to tell you another story: the story of how I became a humanist without knowing what a humanist was. But I have to warn you: it's much less interesting than the story of how I became a Universalist. There's no Buddhist. There's no bicycle. And I didn't hear the voice of God telling me that humanism was the way, the truth, and the light.

The story begins when I was about six years old. I was a curious child. And so, like Greta the groundhog, one of my favorite questions to ask was "why?" And, like Greta the groundhog, I wasn't satisfied by answers that didn't make sense to me. So perhaps I was "predestined" to question the traditional Christian faith in which I was raised and to reject it when it no longer made sense to me.

As I grew older, I found it harder and harder to believe in God as a supernatural, all-powerful, all-knowing, eternal Being who created the universe and came to earth in human form to save at least some people from eternal punishment for the "sin" of being human beings. I moved from faith to skepticism, from skepticism to agnosticism, and then to atheism, and finally to a secularism that focused exclusively on the here and now rather than speculating about the hereafter or supernatural.

I called myself a social and political liberal (and sometimes even a radical or socialist), a civil libertarian, a feminist (or at least a feminist ally), an anti-war activist, and an advocate for social justice and equality. But I didn't call myself a humanist—even though Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson would have labeled me as one of those evil secular humanists who were responsible for the demise of Western civilization.

There's a joke that asks: "What do you call an atheist with children?" The answer is: "A humanist!" And another joke defines a humanist as an atheist who goes to church.

Looking back, I'm afraid those jokes were at least somewhat true for me. After my children were born, I wanted to find a system of values and beliefs, a language, and a community that would help them discover meaning and purpose in their lives. And I was looking for something that was missing in my own life as well.

Gradually, I drifted ever-so-slightly away from my purely secular world and eventually found myself in a Unitarian Universalist congregation: a place that welcomed people like me who believed that it's important to live a good life, but who couldn't believe in a supernatural God, miracles, heaven, or hell. A place where humanism wasn't a four-letter word. A place where most people called themselves humanists.

And so, I started calling myself a humanist, too, even though I wasn't really sure what humanism meant.

II

So, what does it mean to be a humanist?

According to one definition, humanism is a rational philosophy, informed by science, that affirms the dignity of each human being. Does that ring a bell? Inherent worth and dignity of every person?

Another definition says that humanism is an approach to life based on reason and our common humanity. That sounds pretty much like Unitarian Universalism.

Humanists see the universe as natural, self-existing, not created, and guided only by the laws of physics, not supernatural forces. Humanists hold that all values—religious, ethical, social, or political—have their source in human experience and culture rather than theological or ideological abstractions. And they assert that, because this is the only life and only world of which we have certain knowledge and because human beings alone are responsible for our own destiny, we owe it to ourselves and others to make this the best life possible for ourselves and all with whom we share our world.

That sounds pretty good to me! And I think that most of you would probably agree. So I guess that means we're all humanists. Right?

Well, a lot of us are. The most recent congregational profile of UUFR indicated that about half of the fellowship's members identified themselves as humanists. That's fairly consistent with national surveys of Unitarian Universalists. And it's not at all surprising, because humanism is, and has been for many years, one of the most important sources of our Unitarian Universalist faith.

Our principles and purposes affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; freedom of conscience; the democratic process; and the goal of world community. And we recognize that our Unitarian Universalist tradition draws not only from the insights of Judaism, Christianity, and other religions, but also from "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."

It's a mistake, though, to equate Unitarian Universalism with humanism or to think that humanism was invented or is owned by UUs. There are Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and secular humanists as well as UU humanists.

And humanism has been around for a very long time. It can be found in the teachings of Confucius and in the skepticism of many of the ancient Greek philosophers, including Protagoras, who asserted that "man is the measure of all things." And it resurfaced in the 18th and 19th centuries in the skeptical philosophy of David Hume, the writings of Ludwig Feuerbach, who asserted that God is a human invention, and Frederick Nietzsche's proclamation that "God is dead."

We also need to remember that the early Unitarians and Universalists in America—William Ellery Channing, Hosea Ballou, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker, and others—were *not* humanists. They were theists or deists. But their emphasis on human reason, human experience, human character, and the natural world did help to lay the foundations for the religious humanism that emerged during the last half of the 19th century in the thought of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Walt Whitman, Robert Ingersoll, and Felix Adler who founded the Ethical Culture Society.

Humanism first began to emerge within Unitarianism around 1912 when John Dietrich, a Unitarian minister who served first in Spokane and then in Minneapolis, began using the word humanism to refer to his religious beliefs—a "religion without God." Humanism spread rapidly among Unitarians, especially in the Midwest, culminating in a heated and sometimes bitter controversy between theists and humanists at the Unitarian National Conference in 1921. When the first Humanist Manifesto was issued in 1933, fifteen of the thirty-four signers were Unitarian ministers and one, Clinton Lee Scott, was a Universalist minister.

By “the time of the [Unitarian-Universalist] merger ... in 1961, religious humanism had replaced liberal theism as the [theological or] ideological center of” Unitarian Universalism. And by the end of the 1970s, many UUs came to believe that humanism was the “essence of [Unitarian Universalism or] ... the only legitimate” way to be a Unitarian Universalist. And as a result, UUs who were theists or identified themselves as liberal Christians often felt as if they were being pushed out of the denomination by an increasingly “rigid humanist orthodoxy.”

III

During the last twenty years, however, “traditional humanism has lost much of its appeal” for many UUs, myself included.

Many of us felt that “religious humanism was overly rational and lacked a spiritual dimension.” That it “ignored the emotional or feeling aspect of the self.” Many of us felt that it placed too much emphasis on individuals and not enough emphasis on community. Some found it to be intellectually satisfying, but cold, passionless, and unfriendly. Many of us felt that it was too human-centered and placed human concerns, needs, and values over the well-being of nonhuman beings and the natural world itself. Many of us felt that humanism was overly optimistic in its view of human nature and that it lacked an adequate explanation or theology of human evil, sin, and suffering. And many of us felt that, although it affirmed freedom of belief, it was often dogmatic and intolerant.

And so the pendulum has swung away from humanism within Unitarian Universalism as more and more UUs identify themselves as pagans, Buddhists, liberal Christians, theists, religious naturalists, religious liberals, or simply spiritual.

And now it’s the humanists who sometimes feel as if they are being marginalized and pushed out of Unitarian Universalism by the inclusion of earth-centered or neo-pagan rituals, the celebration of Jewish and Christian holidays, praying during Sunday services, and the use of words like God, spirituality, worship, and reverence.

IV

I believe, though, that there is room for humanists, pagans, Buddhists, Christians, Jews, agnostics, atheists, seekers, and others within Unitarian Universalism. And if there isn’t room for wide theological diversity in Unitarian Universalism, then I don’t want to be a Unitarian Universalist.

I believe that what holds us together as Unitarian Universalists is not a common theology or creed, but rather common values, a common approach to religion and life, a common purpose, our common humanity, and, yes, even a core set of beliefs that we commonly hold even though we don’t accept them universally or without qualification.

I believe that respect for the interdependent web of being is one of the most important beliefs and values that holds us together as a religious community.

And I believe that religious naturalism is place where humanists, theists, Christians, pagans, and other UUs can find the common ground that bridges our differing theologies.

V

Bill Murry is a retired UU minister, a former president of Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago, and a bona fide, card-carrying humanist. He was one of one of eleven UU ministers who signed the third Humanist Manifesto in 2003. And my sermon today is my final project for a course on religious humanism that Bill taught at Meadville this past January.

Bill's most recent book, published last year, is titled: "Reason and Reverence: Religious Humanism for the 21st Century." In it, he proposes a "marriage" between religious humanism and religious naturalism—a new naturalistic religious humanism that is based on both reason and reverence.

In his book, Bill defines naturalism as "a philosophical perspective that denies the existence of the supernatural and maintains [instead] that there is only one [reality], the natural universe." "Naturalism," he says, "maintains that human beings are products of nature and natural causes. We are simply one of a prolific nature's multitudinous creations, each unique and special, and all part of one interdependent web."

Naturalism, like humanism, can be either religious or philosophical. Religious naturalism is a naturalism that, in Bill's words, "finds religious meaning in the natural world. For [religious] naturalists, the natural universe is ultimate[—] ... the ground of our being, that in which we live and move and upon which we depend for our very existence."

Religious humanism, according to Bill, "has always been naturalistic." The problem is that religious humanism "has not made explicit the religious implications of [its naturalistic] perspective." A new religious humanism, though, would celebrate the embeddedness of human beings as an inseparable part of the natural world and see the natural world as sacred. It would find wonder, awe, amazement, and wonder in "nature's majesty, beauty, complexity, and power," in the "unimaginable vastness of the universe and [in] the incredible complexity of life." Its sacred story would be the story of cosmic evolution and the evolution of human and nonhuman life—a story that David Bumbaugh describes as the story in which "the universe is continually incarnating itself in microbes and maples, in hummingbirds and human beings, constantly inviting us to tease out the revelation contained in stars and atoms and every living thing." It would tell the story of "the universe becoming conscious of itself." A story that, Bill says, "teaches us that we are all members of one family sharing the same genetic code and a similar history; [a story that] evokes gratitude and astonishment at the gift of life itself and inspires responsible living."

The kinder and gentler humanism that Bill proposes would see human beings not only as "*homo rationalis*" but also as "*homo holisticus*" and "*homo naturalous*." It would call us to "[become] more fully human" by transforming our "mind[s] and heart[s] from self-centeredness to a sense of [ourselves] as part of a larger sacred whole" It would, in Bill's words, call us "from a shallow life of fear, greed, hedonism, and materialism to a meaningful life of love and caring, gratitude and generosity, fairness and equity, joy and hope, and a profound respect for others [and for all life and the natural world]."

VI

I like Bill's kinder, gentler, naturalistic humanism. But I'm less and less willing to use the label "humanism" to describe my religious faith and beliefs.

Like the humanists, I don't believe in a supernatural realm or a supernatural God. I believe in life before death and am pretty skeptical about life after death. I believe that, for better or worse, human beings are responsible for not only our own destiny as a species but for the well-being of all life and the future of our planet.

But I probably use the "God" word too much to be a "real" humanist. I'm comfortable thinking about God as a part of the natural universe—not supernatural—as immanent as well as transcendent. I find it helpful to think and speak of God as the natural, nonpersonal force, energy, or spirit that animates, nourishes, and sustains the entire universe, including human life; the

creative source that “fuels” the continuing evolution of the universe and draws us toward greater wholeness and harmony.

VII

So, even though I’m more and more reluctant to call myself a humanist, I believe that Bill’s new religious humanism is a vast improvement over the old, cold, anthropocentric, dogmatic humanism that has been too prevalent in Unitarian Universalism. I believe that naturalism can breathe new life, passion, and meaning into religious humanism and rescue humanism from its weaknesses. And more importantly, I believe that the naturalism that is incorporated into Bill’s new religious humanism can provide the common ground on which we can build bridges between the theological differences that sometimes divide humanists, pagans, theists, and Christians in UU congregations.

I believe that, despite our differences, we are all religious naturalists if we believe that all life is sacred and hold a deep reverence for life, if we recognize and appreciate the interdependence and interconnection of all life and all of nature, when we understand that human beings are an inextricable part of nature and have a moral responsibility to protect and care for the earth and all life. I believe that we’re all religious naturalists when our lives are filled with awe and reverence in the face of the incredible wonder, beauty, and complexity of the natural world.

But I also believe that we’re all *humanists*. To paraphrase UU minister Christine Robinson: ‘We may be Christian humanists, Jewish humanists, agnostic humanists, atheist humanists, pagan humanists, or naturalistic humanists, but we’re all humanists to the extent that we value human experience and reason. We’re all humanists when we work for justice and concentrate our religious efforts on this life rather than the next.’

“Humanism,” she says, “is a noble faith, and it is a life’s task to live it well. It is a faith which can give meaning and satisfaction to a life of love and service, which engenders gratitude, compassion, justice, and love. ... [Humanism reminds us of] the value of *this* life ... and justice, equity and compassion played out right now, on this earth. For that reminder ... all UUs are profoundly in [humanism’s] debt”

And I would add: “Thank God for humanism.”