

Theological Options for Unitarian Universalists
Part III: Humanism and Beyond
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For those of you who may be joining us for the first time, this is the third of a series of sermons on “theological options” for Unitarian Universalists. If you’re new to this congregation, the concept of theological options may surprise you. Many houses of worship, after all, don’t offer options. Rather, they offer a creed, a statement of common beliefs to which you’re expected to subscribe if you want to belong.

In contrast, Unitarian Universalism is a creedless religious movement. We don’t assume that everyone in the congregation believes the same thing. In fact, we start from the assumption that we *don’t* share a common theology!

Some of us are Christian. Some have mystical leanings. Some are Humanists. Some find inspiration from pagan sources. Some feel strong ties to their Jewish roots – or Hindu, or Buddhist, or Islamic ones.

People look at us sometimes and say, “So, how can you people call yourselves a religion? You don’t all believe the same thing!” But for UUs, common belief isn’t the point of religion. We’re here for other reasons: a common quest for truth and meaning. A caring community of seekers. Courage and strength in anxious times. We believe that what *really* binds people together isn’t belief – but love. We’ve discovered, in the words of an early Unitarian martyr, Francis David, that “we don’t have to think alike to love alike.”

Here, it’s important to point out: this theological diversity didn’t just spring from nowhere. Our religious movement doesn’t exist just because someone thought it was a good idea to create a religion of diversity. We didn’t begin by hanging out a shingle and saying, “All are welcome, regardless of belief.” Maybe that would have been a good idea – but that’s not how it happened.

It happened this way because of history. Unitarianism began about 450 years ago, as a heretical Christian movement. Similarly with Universalism, about 200 years ago. From that starting point, our diversity evolved, and it did so according to a certain pattern.

The pattern is as follows: Every so often within our ranks, a new religious viewpoint emerges, which is a break from the established theology. This viewpoint has been growing for some time, underground – but when it comes to the light, it’s given a name.

It generates great excitement – and also grave anxiety. It becomes the occasion for hand wringing, or even denunciation, by the “old guard.” These “old guard” were once radicals themselves – but now they insist that the new viewpoint will bring everything of importance crashing down around our heads.

Eventually, though, everything calms down, and the new movement becomes part of Unitarian Universalism. It takes its place alongside older viewpoints. Eventually, it becomes part of the consensus. It may even become the new old guard. And then some new controversy arises, and the sequence unfolds again.

The strange and beautiful thing about of the process is that no one leaves. There's no schism. The new doesn't replace the old. It simply takes its place with other points of view; it becomes part of the UU mosaic, another "theological option."

In this sermon series, the first "option" we considered was liberal Christianity, which emerged from orthodox Christianity in 16th century Europe. This was the dominant force within Unitarianism, and later Universalism, for some 300 years. Then, in 19th century America, Transcendentalism emerged – in part a revolt against the Christianity of the Boston Unitarians. Last week, we looked at Transcendentalism as the second UU option.

Today, we examine Religious Humanism, the viewpoint that became dominant within Unitarian Universalism in the 20th century. Historian David Robinson has called it the "most vital and distinctive [Unitarian] movement since Transcendentalism."

Religious Humanism emerged as a distinctive movement around the time of World War I. It had been brewing for some time before that, foreshadowed by some of the controversies of the late 19th century. It can best be understood as a thoughtful and articulate attempt to bring religion into the 20th century – in other words, to bring it into alignment with the discoveries of science.

But how do we define Humanism? Since the word is used in different ways, it can be confusing. It has certain general meanings (humanism with a small 'h') and other, more specific ones (Humanism with a capital 'H'). In its small-h sense, humanism is any philosophy that holds human beings to be important. It is any outlook, whether God-centered or not, emphasizing human values and the enhancement of human life.

In its capital-H sense, Humanism is a name bestowed on various worldviews emergent in specific periods of history. In classical Greece, for example, Socrates was considered a Humanist because he concerned himself with social, political, and moral questions, and thus "called philosophy down from heaven to earth."

Humanism also emerged during the Renaissance. The medieval focus on God shifted to the Renaissance focus on humanity. This shift was seen and felt in many areas of life: art, philosophy, architecture, science, and religion.

But until the 19th century, it never occurred to anyone that "Humanism" might be synonymous with atheism or agnosticism. The publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, in 1859, began to change all that.

After Darwin, a lot of what happened in religion was in response – or reaction - to his ideas. Fundamentalism, which is very much a product of the modern era, arose to challenge the theory of natural selection and evolution. Meanwhile, Humanism arose to support and defend it. It was in this crucible that Humanism became identified with atheism and agnosticism.

John Dietrich was one of the pioneers. Expelled as a heretic from the Dutch Reformed church, Dietrich became a Unitarian minister. From this platform, he began to preach Humanism as a non-theistic religion. He maintained, “Humanism simply ignores the idea of God, failing to see any evidence of intelligent purpose in the universe.”

It’s important to note that Dietrich’s Humanism was not simply a negative philosophy. There was a positive focus on human development and fulfillment. Dietrich declared “the enrichment of human life” to be “the object of our allegiance and consecration.” His colleague Curtis Reese declared the human personality to be the thing in the universe of “supreme worth.”

Many of the ideas of Humanism were brought together in 1933 in the “Humanist Manifesto.” Although this was drafted by Roy Wood Sellars, a university professor, half its signers were Unitarian or Universalist ministers. The Manifesto contains many of the themes that inform Humanism even today.

Not surprisingly, it puts forth a resolutely non-theistic cosmology. Contradicting Genesis, the Manifesto states with confidence: “Religious Humanists regard the universe as self-existing and not created.” It then goes on to affirm evolution: “[Humanity] is part of nature, and...it has emerged as the result of a continuous process.” Furthermore, it specifies the relationship between religion and science, saying that religion must “formulate its hopes and plans in light of the scientific spirit and method.”

The Manifesto even suggests that the scientific method should be applied to personal life. Human beings must learn to face life crises rationally and stoically, without reliance on religious crutches. “Sentimental and unreal hopes and wishful thinking” are to be discouraged.

Other significant themes include the following:

- ❖ Abolition of the distinction between sacred and secular.
- ❖ The necessity of living in the here and now, with no concern for what happens after we die.
- ❖ An emphasis on democracy, cooperation, and a “socialized...economic order.”
- ❖ Finally, a ringing endorsement of the human ability to build a just and humane social order: “[Humanity] is at last becoming aware that [we] alone [are] responsible for the world of [our] dreams, that [we have] within [ourselves] the power for its achievement. [We] must set intelligence and will to the task.”

Where is Humanism within Unitarian Universalism today? Basically, it has followed the evolutionary path described earlier. When it arose, it was hailed by some and scorned as

heresy by others. Overcoming opposition, Humanism became the dominant position within Unitarian Universalism.

By the 1960s or 70s, most people took it for granted that if you were a UU, you were automatically a capital-H Humanist. But then, in the late 70s and early 80s, this assumed consensus began to break down. Why? Some credit our culture's renewed interest in spirituality. Others attribute it to the influx of women into the ministry – though plenty of my female colleagues are Humanist, and many of my male colleagues are not.

Perhaps the best explanation is simply that times have changed. Physics has depicted a universe far more mysterious than the one contemplated by the Manifesto – a universe that even re-admits the possibility of God. Einstein said that everything he had done in his career as a physicist, he had done in order “to know the mind of God” – admittedly a different God from that of traditional religion.

Freud, as well as Einstein, has challenged the Manifesto's rationalistic view of human nature. And in the 1940s, world events arose to challenge Humanism's optimism. After World War II, it's hard not to conclude that the Manifesto seriously underestimates the human capacity for evil.

Unitarian ethicist James Luther Adams, who was in sympathy with the Humanist viewpoint on some counts, points to the cruel paradox of human progress: “The very means and evidences of progress turn out again and again to be also the instruments of perversion and destruction.” Jewish theologian Eugene Borowitz states it more bluntly: “After Auschwitz and Hiroshima, how anyone can say that ‘man is the measure of all things’ is beyond me!”

But it's important to be fair. Just as liberal Christianity has evolved since the days of Ballou and Channing, so has Humanism evolved since 1933. It's entirely possible to develop a Humanism that more adequately takes account of tragedy and evil. It's also possible to develop a Humanism that takes ecology seriously - that sees humanity not as the pinnacle of evolution, but as part of an ongoing process.

I myself am not a Humanist-with-a-Capital-H. My life has preached me a different sermon. Nevertheless, I know that I hold many beliefs in common with Humanists, as do most UUs I know.

For example, I believe that the main focus of religion should be what's happening here and now, not in an afterlife. I believe in evolution, and in the scientific method, and do not place these in opposition to religious truth. I also appreciate the Humanist challenge for producing a more searching, honest, and grounded theism. That's part of the creative tension on which Unitarian Universalism thrives.

Theologically, where is our movement headed now? We seem to be in a period of creative ferment. In addition to Christians, Emersonians, and Humanists, Unitarian

Universalism now offers many other theological options. There are feminists, pagans, Buddhists, Jews, process theologians, to give just a few examples.

Perhaps in time, some new synthesis will emerge. But maybe it won't – and that's okay. It's a very important statement we make as UUs – a saving message, in fact – that people who believe different things can nevertheless worship side by side, in harmony.

In today's world, I don't believe that the most important divide is between people who believe in God and people who don't. By far the most crucial struggle is between exclusive religions that divide people from one another, and inclusive ones that affirm human love, growth, and freedom. Such distinctions cut across religious denominations and theological categories.

As UUs, whatever our theological perspective, we like to think of ourselves as standing on the inclusive side of the divide. But it's important to remember that many other people of faith are standing with us.

So much in our world smothers human dignity, and chokes the human spirit. And there is so much good work to be done. The Humanist Manifesto encourages us to set “intelligence and will” to the task. Intelligence and will, yes – and also spirit, and imagination, and love.

For we need not think alike, to love alike.