

**“The Humanist Manifesto:  
Religion ‘In the Here and Now’”**

**The Rev. Laura Horton-Ludwig, Minister**  
First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton  
December 14, 2008

Today’s question is an easy one within these walls  
but probably quite confusing to most people beyond them:  
Can you be religious without believing in God?

In our tradition, that’s easy: of course you can!  
In this church, it’s our way and our custom  
to make room for lots of different beliefs.  
People who aren’t familiar with the Unitarian Universalist tradition  
sometimes think it’s kind of strange  
that one congregation welcomes Christians and atheists,  
Buddhists and pagans,  
and anyone who is drawn to walk with us.

Those of us who are members here  
have found that what holds us together  
is the commitment we make to one another:  
a shared commitment to responsible freedom  
in matters of the spirit.  
*Responsible* freedom, because we expect  
that you will take your spiritual life seriously  
and do your best to *live* your values in the world,  
but *freedom*, because we believe the best way to find truth  
is to seek with an open mind and an open heart.  
As my wonderful colleague Alice Blair Wesley puts it,  
we are held together by a covenant,  
a common promise to seek the truth together

and “to live by the truths we cannot help believing we have found.”<sup>1</sup>  
*To seek for truth and to live by the truths we can't help believing we have found.*

All throughout our history,  
we've resisted the urge to try to enforce what those truths should be.  
As we say each week in our Words of Affirmation,  
“Love is the doctrine of this church;  
the quest for truth is its sacrament.”  
The only creed, the only doctrine we have  
is to practice love and seek for truth.

Today I want to talk to you  
about the humanist movement within Unitarianism,  
a movement led by thoughtful people, in fact deeply spiritual people  
who found that they could no longer believe in a god  
but refused to be kicked out of the realm of the religious.

Back in the 1910s and '20s, even in Unitarian circles  
it was very unusual and rather shocking  
for someone not to believe in God.

A few outspoken people, however, ministers and laypeople alike,  
were starting to voice their own doubts in public,  
and also starting to articulate a new kind of faith,  
a faith not in the God of the Bible,  
but in the power of human beings to create a better world;  
a faith not in life after death in Heaven,  
but in a global society of justice and peace here on earth;  
a faith grounded in what we can know for sure  
through reason and science.

These are the core ideas  
of what eventually became known as Humanism—  
a religion resolutely focused on the here and now,  
the world available to our senses,

---

<sup>1</sup> Alice Blair Wesley, “In the Beginning,” in Walter P. Herz, ed., *Redeeming Time: Endowing Your Church with the Power of Covenant* (Boston: Skinner House, 1999), p. 4.

the world of fellow human beings,  
suffering and rejoicing just as we all do.

Humanism didn't just come out of nowhere.  
Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as we've seen,  
more and more people in the West  
were starting to doubt some of the very basic ideas  
of the received Christianity of their day.

Over the past few months, we've looked at some of those people.  
We've looked at the Unitarians of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century,  
who, based on their reading of the Bible,  
rejected the idea that Jesus was any more divine than you or I,  
though they honored him as the greatest of human teachers.  
And the early Universalists, who read their Bible  
and concluded that there was no Hell—  
that every person on earth would be saved  
and go to Heaven after they died.  
Those early ancestors of ours  
were still very much within the Christian fold,  
at least in their own eyes.  
Christians in other denominations were not so sure!

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century unfolded, things got pushed even farther.  
Just within our own tradition,  
Ralph Waldo Emerson was telling us that we didn't need the Bible  
to tell us what was right and wrong—  
we just needed to listen within ourselves for the voice of conscience.  
Now, Emerson believed that voice of conscience  
was actually the voice of God speaking inside us—  
but it was not such a big leap to say eventually, as the humanists did,  
that we don't need to believe that voice inside of us is God  
to be moral people.

Likewise we had Theodore Parker,

and later the preachers of the Social Gospel, telling us that the heart of Christianity wasn't about doctrines and beliefs; it was about ethics. It was about what Jesus taught during his life: Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself. And it wasn't such a big leap for the humanists to say, we don't know about God, but we do believe in helping our neighbor.

And you remember those Social Gospellers also told us, Christianity has been way too focused on individual salvation after death. They said, we want to work for *social* salvation, we want to work for a better world here and now, not just for a lucky few but for *everybody*. Again, it wasn't a big leap for the humanists to say, forget about what happens after death. Science can't prove that there is an afterlife, so let's focus on what we do know: the here and now.

So, looking back, we can see most of the major ideas of the humanist movement evolved very organically out of the liberal Christian tradition. But among Unitarians in the 1910s and '20s, humanism was exceedingly controversial. Back then, there was a journal called *The Christian Register* that was the most important Unitarian magazine of the day, like our *UU World* magazine today. In 1920, *The Christian Register* published an article called "What Is a Humanist? This Will Tell You." This article proposed that the church ought to give up the idea that it could teach *the* final truth on life after death or even the existence of God. We can't know for sure whether God exists, we can't know for sure what happens after we die—no one can—

and so we ought to be free to discuss these questions without being afraid we're going to get kicked out of our church.<sup>2</sup> These were some of the ideas the humanists were floating.

And luckily, we have some sense of how other Unitarians felt about them. *The Christian Register* published a couple of comments two weeks after the original article appeared:

A lady in New Jersey writes...with the comment that [the author] had made plain what she has been vaguely thinking for years, and she is grateful beyond words that we published the admirable article. A gentleman in Washington, D.C., as heartily dissents, and says for such a religion he would not give a dime, and we ought not to have given an interview on such a line place in a Unitarian paper. We are in duty bound to teach God!<sup>3</sup>

At that time there was not a consensus! What we now call the “Humanist-Theist Controversy” continued for a few years, but by the early 1930s, humanism had become quite a mainstream position in Unitarian circles. I should make it clear, by the way: not all humanists were Unitarians, by any means, but a lot of Unitarians were and are humanists. When the Humanist Manifesto appeared in 1933, seven out of the nine religious leaders who signed on originally were Unitarians. The other two, by the way, were a Universalist and a liberal rabbi.

---

<sup>2</sup> Sidney S. Robins, “What Is a Humanist? This Will Tell You,” *Christian Register* 99 (July 29, 1920), quoted in Mason Olds, *American Religious Humanism* (Minneapolis: Fellowship of Religious Humanists, 1996), p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> Editorial, *Christian Register* 99 (August 12, 1920), quoted in Mason Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, p. 36.

Now, the Humanist Manifesto is a pretty important document for us because it was very widely read— it got written up in *Time* magazine<sup>4</sup> and many other places— and it spelled out very clearly what that first generation of humanists believed.<sup>5</sup> So I want to spend a little time looking at what exactly it said, and how it relates to what had come before, and to who we are today.

Now, I am mindful that not everyone enjoys hearing about the ins and outs of the history of theology. I remember once in a theology class in seminary, my professor, a very wonderful lady by the way, was in a particularly effusive mood that day, and she told us her idea of Heaven would be just getting to talk about theology all day, every day. At the time I thought, wow, we have very different ideas about Heaven! But now I understand a little better. I love this stuff so much, I want you to love it too!

The whole Humanist Manifesto is fascinating. If you want to really get into it, please pick up a copy in Jackson Hall today and come join in a discussion of it this coming Wednesday evening, at 6:30 here at church, as part of our Classics of UU Theology series.

For now, let me share with you just a few aspects of that original Humanist Manifesto that I think have had the strongest and most lasting impact on our tradition.

---

<sup>4</sup> “Humanism on Paper, *Time*, May 15, 1933, available online at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,745533,00.html>.

<sup>5</sup> The Humanist Manifesto was drafted by a professor named Roy Wood Sellars, the same man who was interviewed for *The Christian Register* article on humanism in 1920. See Mason Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, p. 20.

First of all, and this is so obvious it hardly needs saying,  
humanism has been fearless and tireless  
in declaring you can be religious  
without believing in the God of the Bible.  
The 1933 Manifesto declares:

Religious humanists regard the universe as self-existing  
and not created.

We are convinced that the time has passed for theism....<sup>6</sup>

(Theism, by the way, is a Greek word that means  
believing in a god or gods.)

Now, this statement from the Manifesto is really a statement of faith,  
a statement of religious belief.

Science can't prove that the universe was not created,  
any more than it can prove that a god exists, or doesn't.

Today most of us believe none of us has the truth for all time  
and whatever the whole truth is,  
it is far beyond our small understanding.

But for someone to say back then,  
you get to stop believing in God and still be considered religious,  
that was very liberating to people  
who found they just could not believe in the traditional image  
of a creator God.

There's a very poignant story  
about one of the original religious humanists,  
the Unitarian minister John Dietrich.

He started out as a very traditional Protestant Christian,  
but gradually he lost his faith in a personal God.

He once said, he had tried and tried to listen for the voice of God,  
but he had heard only silence.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Humanist Manifesto I, thesis 1 and excerpt from thesis 6.

<sup>7</sup> Mason Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, p. 45.

What a difficult thing for a minister to say!

But Dietrich was able to make his peace with this great absence,  
and because he shared his struggles publicly,  
he helped many others  
who didn't want to abandon their church  
just because their beliefs had changed.  
Dietrich and the other humanists found something else to believe in:  
the potential and the preciousness of human beings themselves.  
The Humanist Manifesto told us:

Nothing human is alien to the religious.  
The distinction between the sacred and the secular  
can no longer be maintained.<sup>8</sup>

Just as Emerson had said in his day,  
now the humanists were saying, look,  
if there is any holiness to be found, we will find it in our lives.  
The sacred doesn't dwell somewhere else from us,  
up in the sky or in the pages of a special book;  
it's here, in our lives,  
in our laughter and our tears,  
our love and our struggles and our creativity.  
The way we live together, the way we strive to care for each other  
and support each other  
and treat one another with respect and kindness—  
this is how we honor the sacredness of each human life.

Humanism has also given us a very powerful way  
to embrace what science tells us about ourselves,  
and to live in harmony with the rest of the natural world.  
The 1933 Manifesto declares:

Humanism believes that man is a part of nature

---

<sup>8</sup> Humanist Manifesto I, excerpt from thesis 7.

and that he has emerged as a result of a continuous process.<sup>9</sup>

Now, here, of course, we see the impact of modern science—especially the theory of evolution.

The humanists found it pretty exciting to realize science could explain so much about where we come from and why we are the way we are.

They found it deeply satisfying to understand themselves as part of the larger whole.

This was a very different idea from the Judeo-Christian story that human beings were separate from nature and extra-special in the eyes of God.

I want to thank those early humanists for introducing us to their faith that it is good to be a part of nature, it is good to be connected to other living things, it is good to be flesh as well as mind.

This has helped us enormously as we try to wake up to all the environmental problems of our earth and live as one species among many, loving the whole as much as we love ourselves.

And indeed, maybe the most precious gift that humanism has given us is that constant call to focus on making this world better. That has permeated our church and our movement for a very long time.

Listen to these words from the 1933 Manifesto:

The goal of humanism is 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....

---

<sup>9</sup> Humanist Manifesto I, thesis 2.

We assert that humanism will...  
endeavor to establish the conditions of a satisfactory life for all,  
not merely for the few.<sup>10</sup>

It's pretty hard to argue with those words,  
and yet to live up to them—that's the challenge.  
That humanist voice is always with us,  
urging us to make our faith count for something in the world,  
to actually do something  
to make life better for our fellow human beings—  
to share what we have.

In hindsight, it's easy to find flaws in that early Humanist Manifesto.  
It's been revised twice since then, in 1973 and again in 2003.  
The wars and tragedies of the last century have left us more skeptical  
about our capacity to get better and better as a species.  
The new scientific domain of particle physics  
has shown us that the more we understand,  
the more the mystery deepens.  
We understand better now that reason and science  
are not the only ways of knowing.

But so many of the core teachings of humanism remain  
to strengthen us.  
Today, in our movement,  
humanists and theists feed each other,  
sometimes without even knowing it,  
just as that brother and sister did in our story.  
We need one another to be a whole community, a complete people.  
The theists in our midst, those who say, yes, there is a God,  
and the mystics, and the spiritual seekers,  
have given humanism the gift of mystery,  
a reminder that science can never answer the deepest questions.

---

<sup>10</sup> Humanist Manifesto I, excerpts from theses 14 and 15.

And in return, the humanists have given to theism  
the great gift of challenge—  
a challenge to make our faith matter in the world,  
and a reminder that what really counts  
is the legacy we leave behind on earth.

How wonderful, how lovely that it should be so!  
May we live in peace.

Amen.