

Four Faiths 1: Humanism

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Reading: “The Body Is Humankind” by Norman Cousins

I am a single cell in a body of [nearly seven] billion cells. The body is humankind. I am a single cell. My needs are individual but they are not unique. I am interlocked with other human beings in the consequences of our actions, thoughts, and feelings. I will work for human unity and human peace; for a moral order in harmony with the order of the universe. Together we share the quest for a society of the whole equal to our needs. A society in which we need not live beneath our moral capacity, and in which justice has a life of its own.

We are single cells in a body of [nearly seven] billion cells. The body is humankind.

Sermon

Today we continue our ongoing exploration of theology. Two weeks ago I introduced this series by talking about the concepts of religious integrity and functional theologies. Religious integrity means embracing religious ideas and convictions that make sense in the context of real-life experience. And functional theology means finding religious concepts and language that are actually useful in making sense of the world and in guiding our behavior.

Also as part of that introduction, I mentioned four particular approaches to religion – the four faiths – that are described in Fred Campbell’s book, *Religious Integrity for Everyone*. These four faiths are distinguished by different ways of using language, and by what is taken as the primary source of transcendence. That is, what is it that is larger than ourselves that each faith pays particular attention to?

As I pointed out two weeks ago, these four faiths – humanism, naturalism, mysticism, and theism – are not tied to any particular religion. They cut across the usual religious boundaries, and each may be found within the various world religions. And which approach – or combination of approaches - you take depends upon your own religious integrity. What helps you to make sense of the world, and of your life?

Over the next couple of months, I’ll talk about the religious approaches of naturalism, mysticism, and theism. But today we consider the first of the four faiths: humanism.

Humanism has played a major role in our own Unitarian Universalist tradition, especially over the past hundred years, to the point that one of the explicit Sources of our Living Tradition is, and I quote, “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.”

Back around the time of World War I, two Unitarian ministers – Curtis Reese and John Dietrich – began preaching a humanist message that caught on and spread through the movement. The essence of their message is described by Mason Olds in his book, *American Religious Humanism*. He writes that “Reese explained that theocratic religion looks to God for aid in solving problems, whereas democratic religion says that humans

must solve their own problems.” And “Dietrich thought the power to realize the great ideals of humanity resided in humans themselves.”

I’d like to share just a short excerpt of one of John Dietrich’s sermons, which was called “What If the World Went Humanist?”

Suppose then that the world went humanist. What the result would be we can only surmise, and no great social change is attended by good consequences alone. Yet it is wonderful to think what might happen if the vast human power that is devoted to theistic religion today were liberated for other and more profitable uses, if all the energy spent in the worship of God were devoted to the service of [humanity].

I think that gives us a little bit of the flavor of the humanist approach to religion. But let’s back up a bit and consider the basic question: what is humanism? First of all, let me point out that just like religion in general, just like any particular religion, just like Unitarian Universalism, there is no one definitive answer. Life is always more complicated than that. And so I offer a disclaimer that what I say about humanism is not the whole story. It reflects my own understandings and experience, and the results of my less than comprehensive research on the topic. But at least that’s a start, and I hope it encourages you to continue the exploration on your own.

So let’s start with some basic definitions of humanism. My American Heritage Dictionary defines humanism as “A philosophy or attitude that is concerned with human beings, their achievements and interests, rather than with the abstract beings and problems of theology.” That’s okay as far as it goes, and seems compatible with what I described of the message of Reese and Dietrich. I might take issue with the assertion that humanism is not concerned with the problems of theology. After all I’m treating humanism as one approach to theology. And many of the primary issues of theology are basic human issues.

Now suppose that we go to the Humanists themselves for a definition of what they’re about. The American Humanist Association defines humanism as “a progressive lifestance that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity.” For me, the two key words in that definition are ability and responsibility. As Reese and Dietrich preached a hundred years ago, as humans we have the ability and the responsibility to solve our own problems and to achieve our own fulfillment. In the words of a recent campaign slogan, “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.”

Another definition of humanism, short and sweet, comes from renowned Unitarian Universalist author Kurt Vonnegut, who wrote in *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater*: “I am a humanist, which means, in part, that I have tried to behave decently without any expectation of rewards or punishments after I’m dead.”

You may have noticed that the definitions I quoted describe humanism as a “philosophy” or a “lifestance.” They say nothing about religion. In fact, humanism is often understood as an alternative *to* religion, rather than as an alternative religious path. That understanding grows out of the narrow conception of religion as belief in, reverence for, and worship of some supernatural deity. However, if you embrace Fred Campbell’s

more expansive and open-ended definition of religion, as how human beings live within that which transcends them, then there is room for humanism as one way of doing that.

The Humanist Manifesto, written in 1933, was one of the first attempts at a comprehensive articulation of humanism as an organized movement. Several of its signers were Unitarian and Universalist ministers, and they clearly understood humanism as a way of being religious. The seventh of fifteen affirmations contained in that document read as follows:

Religion consists of those actions, purposes, and experiences which are humanly significant. Nothing human is alien to the religious. It includes labor, art, science, philosophy, love, friendship, recreation – all that is in its degree expressive of intelligently satisfying human living. The distinction between the sacred and the secular can no longer be maintained.

The obliteration of that distinction between sacred and secular means, for humanists, not that nothing is sacred, but that everything is sacred.

Let me get back, now, to the notion of transcendence. If religion is understood as how we live with that which transcends us – which is larger than ourselves – then, what exactly is that for humanists? What is their ultimate source of meaning? As I mentioned two weeks ago, Fred Campbell asserts that “Humanists draw the meaning of living from within our human community. They believe that all knowledge and values come from this source.” Human community, then, is that transcendent reality that can give life meaning.

I think that’s actually only the second of two parts of the source of meaning for humanists. The first, however, isn’t exactly larger than ourselves, because it *is* ourselves. The very first principle of Unitarian Universalism calls on us to affirm and promote “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” Human Manifesto II, an update of the original, published in 1973 agrees, stating that “The preciousness and dignity of the individual person is a central humanist value.”

Shakespeare captured the exalted stature of the human individual in *Hamlet* with these words:

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals!

But it is not this exalted view of the individual human being that lies at the heart of the humanist path. It is the collective of all human individuals – each with its own mind and worth and dignity - in the larger community of humanity that becomes an ultimate, transcendent source of meaning. Quoting again from Humanist Manifesto II:

At the present juncture of history, commitment to all humankind is the highest commitment of which we are capable; it transcends [there’s that word: it transcends] the narrow allegiances

of church, state, party, class, or race in moving toward a wider vision of human potentiality.

That's what Norman Cousins was talking about with his "body of humankind," made up of each of our individual selves, and yet so much greater than the sum of its parts.

I have to tell you that earlier this week I had what I can only describe as a religious or spiritual experience of that transcendence of human community. As I stood on the National Mall on Tuesday, in the midst of a couple of million of my closest friends, I felt, deep in my bones, the power and potentiality of the human community joined in common purpose and celebration. I guess it was what you could call a humanist spiritual experience. It was so much larger than myself, and yet I, too, was a part of it. I know my experience was not identical to everyone else's. And yet it wasn't an isolated, solitary experience. At some deep level, it was shared with the gathered community.

Barack Obama, too, in his Inaugural Address, made some powerful points completely congruent with this humanist vision I'm trying to articulate. He paid homage to those with "a willingness to find meaning in something greater than themselves," and went on to say that "at this moment – a moment that will define a generation – it is precisely this spirit that must inhabit us all." And he invoked those twin concepts of human ability and responsibility when he spoke of "what free men and women can achieve when imagination is joined to common purpose, and necessity to courage." And he has talked frequently about the fact that it's not about him. It's about us. All of us. Each of us as a cell in the body of humankind must play our role to enhance the health and well-being of the whole.

One important point to recognize about humanists' transcendent source of meaning: It is not something separate and apart from us, something above us with which we relate as worshipful subjects. It is something of which we are each an integral part. And yet it does transcend our own individual existence.

When I introduced this series of sermons, I mentioned several areas of religious concern which any theological approach must address in some way. I'm not going to go through all of those here relative to humanism. I'll leave that as part of your homework. I would like, however, to briefly address a couple of them.

Epistemology is the study of how we gain knowledge, religious and otherwise. Almost any school of thought on this question must recognize a place for direct individual experience. However, some religious traditions place a higher value on other sources of knowledge, such as revealed scriptures and religious tradition. That is, there are large parts of religious knowledge or dogma that are passed down from generation to generation and are to be accepted simply because of the authority of tradition.

The humanist approach, as expressed in Humanist Manifesto II, asserts that "traditional dogmatic or authoritarian religions that place revelation, God, ritual, or creed above human needs and experience do a disservice to the human species. Any account of nature should pass the tests of scientific evidence."

Humanist Manifesto I states that "Religions the world over are under the necessity of coming to terms with new conditions created by a vastly increased knowledge and experience." And that knowledge comes through direct observation, experimentation, and rational inquiry. If science and dogma come into conflict, then science must prevail.

Humanist Manifesto II also speaks to the issue of ethics, morality, right and wrong, good and evil. It says, in part:

We affirm that moral values derive their source from human experience. Ethics is autonomous and situational needing no theological or ideological sanction. Ethics stems from human need and interest.

There is a common misconception that, if we didn't have God-given commandments handed down from above, then we would simply run amok and indulge every base passion that arises in us. The fact is that rational human reflection, free of any dogmatic coercion, is perfectly capable of recognizing the good sense of basic ethical principles. We may all fall short occasionally of following those principles, but a good humanist is just as aware as a good Christian or Muslim, or whatever, of their importance in the quest for a world of peace, harmony, and contentment.

I don't know how many of you identify as humanists. But even if you lean more toward naturalism, mysticism, or theism, I suspect that there is much in the humanist approach that resonates. In any case, I hope that we can all appreciate that humanism does provide one of several legitimate alternatives for a religious path.

I leave you this morning with some final wisdom from Humanist Manifesto II:

A humanist outlook will tap the creativity of each human being and provide the vision and courage for us to work together. This outlook emphasizes the role human beings can play in their own spheres of action. . .

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 a new vitality. Humanism thus interpreted is a moral force that has time on its side. We believe that humankind has the potential, intelligence, goodwill, and cooperative skill to implement this commitment in the decades ahead.

So may it be.