

"Reason and Religion"

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**All Souls
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4-29-07 Reason and Religion

All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church is a historically humanist congregation. Religious Humanism began in the late nineteenth Century and came to full flower in the early half of the Twentieth Century. As it began it was radical and can even be said to be a revolutionary way of thinking religiously. The ministers of this church were pivotal in the creation of religious Humanism. The Reverends Leon Berkhead, Lester Mondale and Ray Bragg were all signers of the Humanist Manifesto, which advocated this worldly theology. It was highly skeptical and emphasized the world of nature and the kenship of humanity.

In the later part of the 20th Century, Religious Humanism lost its expansive quality. For some it became rigid and even doctrinaire. There is a new wave of religious humanism, brought to us by David Bumbaugh, Bill Murray and new seminarians like our church member Jill Jarvis. Their work is worthy of consideration and honor, as they attempt to re-envision religious humanism.

Is Humanism actually a religion?

Religion has many definitions. It can be understood to be the belief in a divine being or a supernatural power, says Webster's Dictionary. It can also be understood to be any system of belief, code of conduct or style of worship. In this sense Buddhism or Humanism can be seen as religions. The word religion comes from the Latin *religio, religiere*, which means that which binds back or ties things together.

Religion is that which helps us make sense of our lives. It may be a story or a myth, but it can also be a philosophy of life or a moral code. Religion is that which helps us find something to which we can be devoted, that which gives order and meaning to our living. In this sense Humanism is certainly a way of being religious.

Religion has often been confused as being associated only with belief. To be devotedly religious is to follow God's Will. This kind of religion is about having the right belief, following the right rules, which are the rules dictated by God, usually presented as scripture or as doctrine and dogma. In this type of religion, these right words are said to be "Holy Words," or even to be the literal "Word of God." This is the orthodox perspective or even fundamentalist understanding of religion. It is one way of being religious, and it is not ours.

Because many people have the misunderstanding that orthodoxy is the only way to be religious, they have a hard time understanding how religious liberals can even be considered a religion. How can you be a skeptic and be religious. "How can you be a minister or a church member and not believe in God. Isn't that impossible?" I have heard some people say. I remember my Grandmother asking or exclaiming to my parents, "How can you call the Unitarian place you joined a church. You should just call it a social club or a debating society that would be more accurate," she claimed. Can you be an agnostic or simply an ethically concerned person and still be religious? My parent certainly found they could. Of course we can and we

Unitarian Universalist do find a religion and a religious home.

There are plenty of misconceptions about the nature of religion. Would we really say that the majority of Buddhists, Confucians, Taoists, Jains, and Humanists are not religious? In fact they do have beliefs that guide their lives. Most would claim to have a sense of the Holy. They have powerful and useful codes of conduct for ethical and moral behavior. They have practices that are recommended for living fulfilled and more meaningful lives. They are in fact religious. There is something at the center of their lives that gives them a particular world view, that binds their world together and their religion plays a central part in doing so.

Theologian Paul Tillich thought of religion as the depth dimension in life, or that about which we are ultimately concerned. He used words like courage rather than faith. He choose “ground of all being” rather than God. Mircea Eliade, one of the best known scholars of world religions says that religion has to do with acknowledging that which we claim as sacred or holy. UU minister Forrest Church says, “Religion is our human response to the dual reality that we are alive and will also die.” Humanist professor Anthony Pinn defines religion as “that which provides motivation, orientation and direction for human life.” Given these definitions, can you be Unitarian Universalist and a humanist, an atheist or a skeptic and also be religious? Of course.

If you want to know whether we are religious, watch what we do. Or as the Universalists said in the early part of the Twentieth Century, “We believe in deeds not creeds.” Or as is said in Christian scripture, “By their fruits you shall know them.” And if we are looking at the fruits of our community, we have every reason to say ours is a powerful and worthy religion.

What is this religion we practice? What does it mean to be from our faith tradition?

There are many things we have in common, as religious liberals and Unitarian Universalists. We believe in having reverence for life, that all of life is a gift and is a marvel and a wonder. We believe in the sanctity of life and in human dignity. We believe that reason has a place in religion. This is to say that we tend to be naturalistic religious humanists and have been for hundreds, if not thousands of years, as a movement. We believe that our practices are more important than creeds.

Let us take a few moments to look at almost two thousand years to Western religious history to better understand the context of our faith and its religious history.

At the Council of Nicea in 300 CE sought to establish one set of beliefs and to consolidate the Christian world. The Roman Empire sought to consolidate the thousands of different section and version of Christianity into one religion, the official state religion of the Roman Empire. What they created was what I call “Romanism” more than

Christianity. They also established tension between heresy and orthodoxy. After this era and this Council, those who disagree were called heretics. The Nicean Creed established the correct beliefs. The important question in Western religion became whether one shared the correct beliefs or not. We were on the side of the Unitarians, lead by Bishop Arius in this fight. He was an advocate of the Oneness and that character was the central concern more than belief. After Nicea, we were officially no longer of the right religion. We were all heretics.

It was in Fourteenth Century Unitarianism that we see the rise of rationalism or the importance of reason in religion. Faustus Socinus led Unitarians into the Enlightenment, along with his contemporary Francis David, who wrote the first statement of religious tolerance written in human history. Socinians advocated the escape from the “bondage to creed and ecclesiastical tradition.” It accepted “inner reason and conscience” as the only source for religious authority. This is our tradition.

In the early part of the Nineteenth Century, Hosea Ballou was preaching Universalism, the belief that there is no eternal punishment and no hell. The idea of an angry and punishing God did not seem reasonable to him or consistent with his experience of Life. It is said that he was approached after preaching Universalism to a large audience and asked, “With out the threat of hell, what is to keep you from stealing, raping or murdering?” “This is not a fear I share. Those concerns do not fill my imagination. My thinking is on higher plane and focused on better

concerns. My fear is for you that you feel such a need to be restrained.” What steers our behavior is a thoughtful concern for justice, compassion and equity. Our religion is reasonable and is more concerned with the practice of it than in sharing the right beliefs.

During the Nineteenth Century William Ellery Channing was one of the great voices of our tradition. He said many things, but his largest contribution was the assertion that religion can and should be reasonable. The Bible he said should be seen as being like any other book and should be read as we would read any other great book of literature and understood in the same fashion. This is not entirely a usual thought in our day and age, but during the Nineteenth Century, Channing’s ideas were outrageous. God, he thought, will not speak to us in a language we cannot understand but will make truth available to us in clear and in thoughtful human ways.

There have been many developments within religious liberalism and Unitarian Universalism from then to now, from the rise of Transcendentalism to the rise of Religious Humanism. All them have deepened and affirmed the human capacity to act as conscience dictates and to use reason to better understand religion.

In my young adult years, I attended the University of Oregon. During my sophomore year, I decided to live alone in a small house out some distance from the University. I studied hard. I have strong memories from that year, and especially I recall the Saturday afternoon, when I visited

for the first time in my life with two Jehovah's Witnesses. They knocked on the door and asked to come in and visit with me about religion. I was ready for a break from my studying and welcomed them in. They shared their faith with me. So, I thought it only reasonable that I should share my very different vision of religion with them. I expressed my strong doubts about an anthropomorphic God, a Big Daddy in the sky, Cosmic Peeping Tom. I shared that I thought we had the capacity to reason, because we were expected to use it, to interpret scripture and not to see it as just a set of rules or dictates. Why have a mind if we aren't supposed to use it, I heard my self say. When they disagreed intensely, I told them, and I said, "If my understanding of God was correct, God would understand my doubt and thoughtfulness and even wrong thinking." If they were right and my doubts were going to send me to hell, then I offered to curse God in that moment and in the here after. They quickly prayed for my soul and left. That they left doesn't surprise me, but I was surprised by how clearly I understood reason as central to religion. I believed that then and still do now.

I was the historian Earl Morris Wilbur in the early part of the Twentieth Century who first described Unitarianism as the religious practice of using freedom, reason and tolerance. Earl Morris Wilbur said that the reason we use reason in religion was to help prevent fanaticism and to cast out superstition. Religion should be pragmatic and have strong practical application. The purpose of using reason in our lives is to help us elevate our lives.

We all fall prey to temptations to eat too much, to give in to excess, to distraction and over indulge in one way or another. Reason can remind us of what is truly in our and society's best interest and remind us how to act accordingly.

We do not long to be greedy, rude or self absorbed, but any of us can come to act in such a manner. Thoughtful devotion to our better selves and higher purposes, reminds us that serving some thing greater than ourselves will make us happier than allowing self importance or the need for instant gratification to rule our lives.

Reason is useful in that it allows us to stand outside of ourselves and ask what will work best and lets us experiment to find out. We can decide that some things are so important that whether it works or not, it is so important that whether it is practical, does not matter anyway.

Here are some of examples of this use of reason. With aging my metabolism has slowed down. If I eat like I did when I was younger I will soon be much heavier than I would like to be. So, my desire says eat all of the deserts you want or are offered. Reason reminds me that I do want to control my weight. So, I choose to eat only one desert a week. Limiting my deserts makes the ones I do eat that much more precious. This is about how I eat, but is also about how any of can chose to be positively self limiting.

Driving down the road, a large SUV is coming onto the highway off of an on ramp. It is so out of control that it

is running into the lane I am driving in. If I had not been watching carefully, they would have crashed into me. They seem pretty out it. They drive down the middle of two lanes of traffic blocking any one from passing them. My emotional reaction is to try to run them off of the road. Experience informs me that, if these idiots drive like that then they probably are dangerous, drugged or utterly without self awareness. Experience reminds me that messing around with similar folks did not end well. Reason reminds me that I want to be a force for peace and love in the world. So, I smile at them and slow down or turn down another street. I believe that the consequences of the SUV driver actions will at some point catch up with them, and that it is not my place to be their consequences, if I can help it. I choose to be a peaceful presence and do my best to act in this manner. My reason helps elevate my behavior. This is the use of reason in creating ethical application.

On a larger scale I feel the same way about how we are acting in Iraq. Our policies are not being debated. It appears that we are being an international bully. Instead of apologizing for there being no weapons of mass destruction, we continue an unjust war. Our policies seem to be about world domination and controlling the oil in the Middle East, but these are not the policies we are debating. Democracy and ethical behavior both require the use reason and the debate of what is ethical and right.

It does not matter whether we believe in God or not. Some of us do and some of us don't, but it does matter

what we do and how we live. This is the essence of religious humanism and of Unitarian Universalism. Our Unitarian Universalist Purposes and Principles encourage us to affirm human dignity and to work for world peace. We are encouraged to achieve this practice by regularly using reason to assess our lives and to evaluate truth. This is why we offer so many classes, reading together the books like the End of Faith by Sam Harris or by reading Thoreau or Emerson and finding them to be guides toward meaningful and full lives.

Religious scholar Karen Armstrong is one of the great and exciting comparative religion scholars of our times. She has studied many of the world's religions and responds to her learning about religion in this way.

“In the course of my studies, I have discovered that the religious quest is not *just* about discovering “the Truth” or *just about finding* “the meaning of life,” but is about living intensely in the here and now. The idea is not to latch onto some superhuman personality or to “get to heaven” but to discover how to be fully human...*and fully alive.*”

Eternity is not necessarily in the here after, but it is certainly in the here and now. So, what we live by is what we are and will be for all time unto eternity. This is the practice of a reasonable religion.

First Reading

THE FREE MIND

William Ellery Channing

I call that mind free which masters the senses, and which recognizes its own reality and greatness:

Which passes life, not in asking what it shall eat or drink, but in hungering, thirsting, and seeking after righteousness.

I call that mind free which jealously guards its intellectual rights and powers, which does not content itself with a passive faith:

Which opens itself to light whencesoever it may come; which receives new truth as an angel from heaven.

I call that mind free which is not passively framed by outward circumstances, and is not the creature of accidental impulse:

Which discovers everywhere the radiant signatures of the infinite spirit, and in them finds help to its own spiritual enlargement.

I call that mind free which protects itself against the usurpations of society, and which does not cower to opinion:

Which refuses to be the slave or tool of the many or of the few, and guards itself as nobler than the empire of the world.

I call that mind free which resists the bondage of habit, which does not mechanically copy the past, nor live on its old virtues:

But which listens for new and higher monitions of conscience, and rejoices to pour itself forth in fresh and higher exertions.

I call that mind free which sets no bounds to its love, which, wherever they are seen, delights in virtue and sympathizes with suffering:

Which recognizes in all human beings the image of God and the rights of God's children, and offers itself up a willing sacrifice to the cause of humankind.

I call that mind free which has cast off all fear but that of wrongdoing.

Which is calm in the midst of tumults, and possesses itself, though all else be lost.

Second Reading

Finding a Balance & Testing Religious and Moral Views

Traditional humanism emphasizes the importance of intelligence and the use of reason and critical thinking in determining what is true or valid. However, including the role played by the emotions adds a deeper dimension to our thinking processes. We think as whole persons, person of both intelligence and feelings. Thinking often involves a dialogue between head and heart. Michael Werner often involves a dialogue between head and heart. Michael Werner suggests that “the human mind must be seen more as a ‘committee of the minds,’ with rational, emotional, instinctual, behavioral, etc., minds competing and interacting.” Thinking and feeling are not two distinctly separate functions but rather feelings and emotions are continuous with thought and ideas. The dualism which assumes a bifurcation between emotions and thinking is erroneous.

Although feelings and intelligence work together, sometimes intelligence has to trump feelings. For example,

some emotions lead to destructive behavior unless checked by intelligence. Anger at another person may cause me to want to harm that person, at which point my intelligence must rein in that emotion. On the other hand, compassion may lead a person to work to alleviate homelessness. That person's intelligence must then be used to determine what kind of work would be most effective and within her ability.

By applying the pragmatic test to religious beliefs and moral perspectives, we can verify their truth or determine their falsehood. The test for religious and moral views is both whether they work and how they work. One test of a religious belief is, of course, whether it squares with what we know about the world. But another test is its effect on the individual who holds it. Does it enable that person to be a happier, more productive, more loving person whose life benefits others? Or does it produce an angry, self-centered, and authoritarian personality whose life is destructive to others? Another test is the effect of one's religious perspective on society. Does it benefit or harm the community? Does it lead to a society that is more just and more equitable or one that is unjust and unfair to some of its members? As Jesus said, "By their fruits you shall know them."

