

Unitarian Universalism: A Humanistic Faith

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Corliss Lamont in his book, The Philosophy of Humanism, says, “To define twentieth-century humanism briefly, I would say that it is a philosophy of joyous service for the greater good of all humanity in this natural world and advocating the methods of reason, science and democracy.” It is this humanism that under girds our Unitarian Universalism and enables us to be inclusive of a variety of philosophic and theological viewpoints. In 1931 in a small booklet put out by the Unitarian Laymen’s League it was written, “Some who believe in God are inclined to let God work out (God’s) great purposes alone; others labor zestfully for human betterment to fulfill the will of God with the help of God. Some who do not believe in God see no great purpose in life, view the human scene with pessimism and live and act accordingly; while others, seeing no help from outside are impressed with the need of (humanity) to help (itself). Some who believe in person immortality are indifferent to the problems of this world because everything will be all right in the next world. Others are spurred on to great endeavor because their future life will begin where this one leaves off. The disbeliever in immortality may say, ‘let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die’; or, since the present life is his(/her) one and only chance; he(/she) will strive to make the most of it.

“...your fundamental beliefs are important, but it is still more important what you do with them.” On the mugs in the coffee hour room are our old name and a motto. The motto is “Deeds not creeds.” **The heart of our religion is about service for the greater good of humanity. The rest must not hinder that but assist it. Our faith must be lived. Do good, the rest is commentary.**

A national conference of Unitarian churches was formed in 1865. Some objected to the creedal language in the constitution. They lost the battle, but won the war. At the second annual convention in 1866 in Syracuse some, according to historian David Robinson, “attempted to get the convention to disavow any ‘common creeds or statements of faith’... they also proposed to change the name to the National Conference of Unitarian and Independent Churches, thereby explicitly affirming the right of many member congregations to identify themselves outside the Christian fold.” They lost again that time, and some separated to become the Free Religious Association, but eventually their ideas became accepted within the Unitarian fold. This was true first in the more liberal west. In the 1870s the western Unitarians claimed the motto, “Freedom, Fellowship, and Character in Religion.” Non-creedal, communal and ethical, these are still elements important in Unitarian Universalism today. Our beliefs are free, we worship and develop spiritually within a community of other Unitarian Universalists, and we believe that how we live should be in concert with our values. Our faith is non-creedal, communal and ethical.

We are free to believe or not to believe what we will of God or the Tao, resurrection or incarnation. What is important in our beliefs is that they do us and others no harm. Unitarian Universalist religious educator, Sophia Lyon Fahs wrote, “Some beliefs are like walled gardens. They encourage exclusiveness, and the feeling of being especially privileged. Other beliefs are expansive and lead the way into wider and deeper sympathies. Some beliefs are like shadows, clouding children’s days with fears of unknown calamities. Other beliefs are like sunshine, blessing children with the warmth of happiness. Some beliefs are divisive, separating the saved from the unsaved, friends from enemies. Other beliefs are bonds in a world community, where sincere differences beautify the pattern. Some beliefs are like blinders, shutting off the power to choose one’s own direction. Other beliefs are like gateways opening wide vistas for exploration. Some beliefs weaken a person’s selfhood. They blight the growth of resourcefulness. Other beliefs nurture self-confidence and enrich the feeling of personal worth. Some beliefs are rigid, like the body of death, impotent in a changing world. Other beliefs are pliable, like the young sapling, ever growing with the upward thrust of life.” I remember as a child growing up in an evangelical Christian home being afraid that I would commit some childhood sin just at the moment that Jesus returned and I would have no chance to ask forgiveness and so be condemned

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to hell on account of not just my sin but also poor timing. “Some beliefs are like shadows, clouding children’s days with fears of unknown calamities.” We feel free to reject them.

We as Unitarian Universalists encourage a knowledge of the great faiths of this world; Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam but we are quite free with our rejections of what within these faiths we see as detrimental to the greater good of all humanity. **The heart of our religion is about service for the greater good of humanity. The rest must not hinder that but assist it.** We reject the Christian notion that God chooses to save some and condemn others. We reject the Hindu idea of castes. We reject the Jewish notion of the superiority of men over women. We see great virtue in the Christian teacher Jesus who loved those whom his society rejected and reached out to them with a healing touch. We see great virtue in the Jewish prophets who were willing to stand up to even the king and speak out for justice for the poor. We see great virtue in the Hindu sense that each person must seek the holy in his or her own way. Some have said Unitarian Universalists can believe anything they want. That is not so. Beliefs that hinder service to the greater good of humanity are not acceptable. Those that advance service to humanity’s greater good are ours to embrace. **The heart of our religion is about service for the greater good of humanity. The rest must not hinder that but assist it. When our beliefs are lived out they should bring about good. Do good, the rest is commentary,**

If we reject and accept pieces of the world’s religion then where does the Unitarian Universalist find his or her authority for determining what is good and right and true. This is the part of our faith that is often most frightening to non-Unitarian Universalists. We find our authority within ourselves, in our reason and in our and in humanity’s experiences. We may read the Bible and the Koran and the Tao te Ching and the Vedas, but we know these as reflections of the human experience of the divine and as we read we test what we read with our own reason and against our own experience. We trust that we can come to know what is good and right and true within ourselves.

We do not assume that we are either born or come into adulthood knowing what is good and right and true. It is by the very practice of our religion that we become more and more able to know the good. A small child who hits his friend quickly learns that that is not a good way to keep a friend. Sometimes we learn by mistakes, but we learn.

The individual person within the context of human interconnection is the base of religious authority. In its beginnings humanism had an extremely optimistic view of human nature. Humanism as we know it today began in the 1920s. The War to End all Wars was over. Life was good. The Great Depression, the Holocaust, the totalitarian turn of the great communist experiment served to temper that optimism, but it is still there. Anne Frank wrote in her diary that despite everything she still believed people were good at heart. That faith is at the heart of humanism. We know we are not perfect but we also know we can envision something better. We have been taught by history to test our views. “Scientifically” eugenically perfecting the race is not for the greater good of humanity. Exiling the intellectuals of a society and putting them to hard labor does not lift up the poor and uneducated; it is not for the greater good of humanity. But, many were convinced these things were for the greater good. Human beings have been convinced that horrible things should be done in the name of what is for the greater good of humanity. Humanists have learned to be questioners and skeptics. No Unitarian Universalist minister or other leader will ever be worshipped or followed blindly as long as we retain our humanist base. We believe human beings are the ones who must define the good, but we also know we have been wrong. **The heart of our religion is about service for the greater good of humanity.** We need to test that our service really is for the greater good.

Three leaders in the humanist movement were Curtis Reese, Unitarian minister formerly Southern Baptist preacher; John Dietrich, Unitarian minister formerly minister in the Reformed Church, and Charles Potter, Unitarian minister formerly Baptist minister. In his book, [The Unitarians and the](#)

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Universalists David Robinson says, “Reese directly stated that ‘the outstanding characteristic of modern liberals and indeed of all modern thinking, is the evaluation of the personality as the thing of supreme worth’. Such personality had to be free of the pull of institutions, which often had to be ‘outgrown, and... like the hull of a chrysalis, be burst asunder and left only to mark an epoch past’.” Some have described leading a Unitarian Universalist congregation as like trying to herd cats, but that is how we want it to be. We want to be together but also be independent. I left one faith to become a Unitarian Universalist however my beliefs may grow and change I do not expect to have to leave Unitarian Universalism. It will grow with me.

Unitarian Universalism is not an easy faith. We must develop our own theology, our own rituals, our own ethics. We have a course for adults called “Building Your Own Theology” which ends with each participant sharing his or her own credo. In a Unitarian Universalist congregation I served in West Virginia a small Iranian contingent brought the celebration of No Ruz, Iranian new year celebrated at spring equinox, to the congregation. I was the minister. I know nothing of No Ruz. The people themselves began a new tradition. They did an annual No Ruz service for the whole congregation. Rev. Norbert Capek, Czech Unitarian minister, developed the ceremony of flower communion because he missed the ritual of the Catholic Church he had left. Today Unitarian Universalist congregations around the world celebrate flower communion. We develop our own beliefs and our own rituals. We must also develop our own ethic.

“(Curtis Reese) stressed ‘the essentially interdependent nature of human beings’ and called for a principle of ‘radical good-will’ to help usher in a united world. ‘The coming order,’ he wrote, ‘is a world order.’” Unlike Jefferson Curtis was not content to be a Unitarian by himself. There is a spiritual reason to worship and work together.

Many today are content to be spiritual in isolation from a religious society. But neither the personal growth nor the betterment of society that should result from a religious life are best served in isolation. We need one another to develop an ethic. I have been asked more than once, “Is Unitarian Universalism a religion?” My answer is that perhaps it is not. We do not have a doctrine or creed to extol. What we are is a religious community in which each person can build his or her own religion based on his or her own beliefs and experiences and have the way he lives tested by others. In 1838 In his Harvard Divinity School Address Ralph Waldo Emerson asked why we should have a religion based on the experiences of ancient Israelites or turn of the millennium followers of a Nazarene and not a religion based on our own experiences. It was a rhetorical question.

It a religion based on our own experiences that humanism seeks to be and our Unitarian Universalism is based in this humanism. In the preamble to the first version of the Humanist Manifesto prepared in 1932 and 1933 it is said, “There is great danger of a final, and we believe fatal, identification of the word religion with doctrines and methods which have lost their significance and which are powerless to solve the problem of human living in the Twentieth Century. Religions have always been means for realizing the highest values of life. Their end has been accomplished through the interpretation of the total enviroing situation (theology or world view), the sense of values resulting there from (goal or ideal), and the technique (cult), established for realizing the satisfactory life. A change in any of these factors results in alteration of the outward forms of religion. This fact explains the changefulness of religions through the centuries. But through all changes religion itself remains constant in its quest for abiding values, an inseparable feature of human life.

“Today man’s larger understanding of the universe, his scientific achievements, and deeper appreciation of brotherhood, have created a situation which requires a new statement of the means and purposes of religion. Such a vital, fearless, and frank religion capable of furnishing adequate social goals and personal satisfactions may appear to many people as a complete break with the past. While this age does owe a vast debt to the traditional religions, it is none the less obvious that any religion that

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can hope to be a synthesizing and dynamic force for today must be shaped for the needs of this age. To establish such a religion is a major necessity of the present. It is a responsibility which rests upon this generation.” “Any religion that can hope to be a synthesizing and dynamic force for today must be shaped for the needs of this age.” Our religion must fit our time and our circumstance. We must each build our own theology, but we can do that individual work in communion with one another. That is what Unitarian Universalism is about. We are a religious community seeking to help individuals serve the greater good of humanity.

Even in our togetherness we retain our freedom. “ In the order that (Curtis Reese) envisioned, democracy would be the operative principle. For Reese this meant not only a political democracy in the sense in which we usually understand it but a spiritual democracy as well. He rejected the ‘monarchic view of religion’ that placed God in the role of master and humans in the role of slaves and envisioned instead ‘ a religion that would not be shaken even if the old thought of God were outgrown.’” Unitarian Universalists have redefined God, rejected God, and reclaimed God. It is our relationship with the holy that matters to our faith and not dogma.

It is humanism that under girds our Unitarian Universalism and enables us to be inclusive of a variety of philosophic and theological viewpoints. “Some who believe in God are inclined to let God work out (God’s) great purposes alone; others labor zestfully for human betterment to fulfill the will of God with the help of God. Some who do not believe in God see no great purpose in life, view the human scene with pessimism and live and act accordingly; while others, seeing no help from outside are impressed with the need of (humanity) to help (itself)...your fundamental beliefs are important, but it is still more important what you do with them.” Thinking that what you do with your beliefs is more important than what they are is humanism. **The heart of our religion is about service for the greater good of humanity. The rest must not hinder that but assist it. Do good, the rest is commentary.**

Rev. Cynthia A. Snavelly
February 20, 2005