

“Can Humanism Be Religious?”  
by Rev. Felicia Urbanski  
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Reading: “Humanism and Its Aspirations” (Humanist Manifesto III) *See pdf document.*

Sermon

What was just read is really quite an achievement, don't you think? "Humanism and its Aspirations", also called the "Humanist Manifesto III". It was written in 2003. The signatories include a number of Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists:

- Maureen and the late Carl Thichener, two of the ministers of the Waterloo congregation, where I just served as interim.
- John Weston, your ministerial settlement director, who will assisting you in your search for a permanent, settled minister.
- Stefan Jonasson, who is minister in both Arborg and Gimli, Manitoba, as well as UUA Consultant to large congregations.

And outside of the Unitarian and Universalist ministry, there are signatories with some very impressive backgrounds:

Philip Anderson, nobel laureate in physics. Yuan T. Lee, nobel laureate in chemistry. David Bumbaugh, professor at Meadville Lombard Theological School. Richard Dawkins, professor at the University of Oxford, now famous author of *The God Delusion*. The late Kurt Vonnegut, novelist. Rianne Eisler, author of *The Chalice and the Blade*. The list is quite lengthy!

You may be wondering, "Well, if this is the Humanist Manifesto III, what about the first or second?" The first manifesto - and probably the most famous - was written in 1933. The second in 1973, forty years later. Now here comes another manifesto, only thirty years later. And what can we observe about it? Well, it's comparatively short and concise. It's rather modest in its claims, and is silent on specific issues of our day. It may not "say it all" for every single person, but then again it probably is a good, basic outline that most all humanists can live with.

So who are these Humanists, besides the ones who signed this latest document?

Well, throughout Unitarian history in particular, there have always been people who honour the human enterprise, the human ability to strive towards something more. There have always been those who view ancient scriptural writings as symbols, pointing beyond themselves to something, well, human! Something that points to the human quest for meaning. After the time of the ancient Greeks, Humanism developed most strongly during the Renaissance, and certainly during the Age of Enlightenment, with the emphasis upon human reason and science.

Yet the question has be asked: Can Humanism be religious?

Some people might think that these two words should never be uttered in the same sentence!

Let's look just for a minute at the word "religious". It's gotten some really bad press recently! Arguments could be made for how some equate "religious" with "supernatural". Yet the origins of Latin religio derive from ligare "to bind, or connect", or perhaps re (again) + ligare "to reconnect." This interpretation is favoured by modern scholars such as Tom Harpur and Joseph Campbell, but was made prominent by St. Augustine. Another possibility is using the word "religion" in the sense of "choose", "go over again" or "consider carefully". It may also be from Latin religiō, religiōn-, perhaps from religāre, to tie fast.

So my point is that we shouldn't point to the word "religious" and think it only has one meaning.

In my past, I've realized that several people who have influenced my Unitarian Universalist faith have been religious humanists. I remember when I was in my mid-twenties and I was so excited to have joined a UU congregation, in NYC. That congregation had a tradition of pairing up new members with long-time members, and I was paired with a most delightful woman, who seemed to be quite old to me then, but who was bright and conversational and inquisitive about everything. I remember she trusted the scientific method, and was very practical and down-to-earth. It was such a good mentorship, that first year of my membership in that church. I felt connected to the community, and that I had made a new friend. This woman's humanism shone through like a deep embrace of all that was real in this natural world, always questioning, always seeking. Although we haven't been a part of each other's lives for over 25 years ago now, her influence remains with me.

Humanism really is a spiritual path. It is a spiritual path that requires as much discipline as any other, because it is grounded in a response to the most basic experiences and expressions of the human condition.

Another Humanist who has greatly influenced my religious thinking has been a minister, whose final studies at the University of Winnipeg's Faculty of Theology overlapped the beginnings of mine. I've mentioned him a few times before, his name is Stefan Jonasson. Now Stefan is definitely a religious Humanist. In fact, he served for a few years as president of the Friends of Religious Humanism, now called the "Huumanists", spelled HUUMANISTS.

Last year, Stefan sent something in to the now retiring Executive Director of the Canadian Unitarian Council, Mary Bennett. Mary sends out tons of information via email, and one of the items I found in my inbox then was Stefan's comments to the host

of the CBC radio show called "The Current". It so happens that a priest, a rabbi, and a theologian were interviewed this past March.

What disappointed my friend Stefan about the show was that all three religious leaders were asked by the interviewer about humanism and spirituality, and all three avoided answering it!

Many of us wish Stefan himself would have been interviewed on that radio show, since in his email he gave us his answer:

“As both a Unitarian minister and a humanist, I would argue that a humanistic spirituality is about the only one that makes sense in the light of the spirit of scripture, and democracy rather than received authority. No less a humanist than the late Carl Sagan observed that a scientific worldview is not only the deep sense of awe and wonder that underlies the scientist’s quest for knowledge. Noting that ‘Atheists have as much spirit as everyone else,’ French philosopher Andre Comte-Sponville asks, “why would they be less interested in spiritual life? Humanist spirituality does exist and it enriches and ennobles the lives of those who claim it as their own. But people must look beyond the ‘usual suspects’ and their tired old traditions if they are to find it.”

So well spoken, I say, and so spiritually uplifting!

Even though I myself don't self-identify as a Unitarian Universalist Humanist, I can be influenced by this approach to life and appreciate this kind of depth of reflection. There are so many people, not only in our religious movement, but out in the world who are humanists who live with a deep sense of wonder and awe, even while using their capacity to reason.

For example, the molecular biologist Ursula Goodenough, who wrote *The Sacred Depths of Nature*. She was once overwhelmed by the size and scope of the universe, and rather than despair over the smallness of Earth, and all of us on it being so utterly insignificant, she says this:

"I can see that what I am studying as locus of Mystery." She uses a capital M when writing Mystery. "The Mystery of why there is anything at all, rather than nothing. The Mystery of where the laws of physics came from. The Mystery of why the Universe is as it is."

In our own tradition, I'd like to compliment this with some words from a pamphlet called "The Faith of the Humanist", written by Sarah Oelberg. She writes:

"We are all connected to the world, the cosmos, and everything therein. Humanism teaches that our well-being, and our very existence, depends upon the web of life, in ways we are only beginning to understand - that our place in nature is to be in harmony with it.

Humanism leads me to find a sense of wider relatedness with all the world and its peoples, and it calls me to work for a sound environment and a humane society."

She continues: "As I grow older, I appreciate more and more the need for a spiritual life. I find my spirituality mostly in using my intelligence and creativity. I find my spirituality in using my creativity to build an enduring peace and beauty in my life. There is a unique spark of divinity in each of us, by virtue of our human endowment; we need only try to find it. My humanism helps me to see, that to be honest with myself, to face life openly, and to be loyal to high ideals, is to be spiritual."

Sarah Oelberg's phrase "a unique spark of divinity in each of us" for me connects her to the Quakers, the Christian mystics, to mystics of all religious traditions. Similarly, Ursula's study of the stars, with what she calls the "radiant signatures" of that Mystery with a capital M, brought her, in her own words, both "reverence" and to the development of a "credo". Ursula Goodenough says: "For me, the existence of all this complexity and awareness and intent and beauty - and my ability to apprehend it - serves as the ultimate meaning, and the ultimate value." She says: "I profess a credo of continuation - of human continuation. We may be the only questioners in the universe, the only ones who have come to understand the astonishing dynamics of cosmic evolution. We are, whether we like it or not, the dominant species - and thus, the stewards - of this planet. If we can revere how things are, and can find a way to express our gratitude for our existence, then we should be able to figure out, with a great deal of work and good will, how to share the Earth with one another, and with its creatures - how to restore and preserve elegance and grace, and how to commit ourselves to love and joy and laughter."

Religious Humanism. Full of reverence for humanity, and for all of life.

I'd like to end today with some very pertinent words from a Unitarian minister, a historical figure now, who was a great pioneer as well as a great extemporaneous preacher, Samuel McChord Crothers. Here's what he says about the idea of "wonder":

“Say if you will, that you are a machine, very well, you are a machine – a machine that thinks, a machine that plans, a machine that loves, a machine that is not satisfied with itself by goes on inventing all sorts of things and creating all sorts of things. That thinking, loving, hoping machine is just as wonderful as if you called it a soul. I do not see that it makes any difference at all what you call it.

A [person] may say, I believe in God. Another [person] may say, I do not believe in God. That does not make any difference to me as I look out upon the world. I am not wondering at your definition; I am simply facing a reality which I cannot easily pass by, and after all your denials it is just where it was before, made all the more wonderful by the questionings which have come...

That is the way religious [people] in all ages, just because they were religious, have felt, not about what they were told, but about what they experienced in their own lives, in the things they say, in their sorrows, in their distresses, in their hopes. They saw something that made them wonder; and the wonder grew..."

May we all open our hearts and minds to allow wonder to take hold of us, rekindling our curiosity and reminding us that the earth is precious - that we are precious. So may it be.