

First Unitarian Society of Schenectady, New York
“Christian Humanism”

Rev. Sam Trumbore March 11, 2012

Call to Celebration

A few of us who are Secular Humanists may be experiencing a little discomfort putting the words Christian in front of Humanist. Yet there are strong connections between them.

In the book: *The Philosophy of Humanism*, highly respected Humanist Corliss Lamont, honored as "Humanist of the Year" by the American Humanist Association, writes:

New Testament ethics is based on the assumption that the most meaningful and worthwhile part of man's life lies in the realm of immortality. The New Testament as a document is so full of ambiguities as to correct human conduct that the devil is always quoting it for his own devious purposes. Nonetheless, the gospels have much to offer any generous and humane ethical philosophy. Running through them is a radically democratic spirit, a deep equalitarian feeling, that has been the inspiration of numberless workers for a happier humanity in this mundane sphere. Jesus raised his voice again and again on behalf of broad Humanist ideals such as social equality, the development of altruism, the brotherhood of humanity, and peace on earth. According to the gospel story, he was much aware of our material needs and himself, fed the hungry and healed the sick. Some of his specific sayings can be given a this-worldly interpretation consonant with Humanism. I am thinking of such familiar statements as: Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free; and I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.

Humanism, then, holds that certain of the teachings of Jesus possess an ethical import that will always be an inspiration for the human race; and that the Jesus portrayed by the gospels represents one of the supreme personalities of all time.

Let us begin this morning without polarizing Christianity and Humanism. Let us look for the harmony between them that can serve our inspiration, growth and development as we join together in the celebration of life.

Reading

Excerpts from the third Humanist Manifesto from the American Humanist Association

Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity.

The lifestance of Humanism—guided by reason, inspired by compassion, and informed by

experience—encourages us to live life well and fully. It evolved through the ages and continues to develop through the efforts of thoughtful people who recognize that values and ideals, however carefully wrought, are subject to change as our knowledge and understandings advance.

Knowledge of the world is derived by observation, experimentation, and rational analysis. .

Humans are an integral part of nature, the result of unguided evolutionary change.

Ethical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience.

Life's fulfillment emerges from individual participation in the service of humane ideals. We aim for our fullest possible development and animate our lives with a deep sense of purpose, finding wonder and awe in the joys and beauties of human existence, its challenges and tragedies, and even in the inevitability and finality of death..

Humans are social by nature and find meaning in relationships. Humanists long for and strive toward a world of mutual care and concern, free of cruelty and its consequences, where differences are resolved cooperatively without resorting to violence.

Working to benefit society maximizes individual happiness.

Humanists are concerned for the well being of all, are committed to diversity, and respect those of differing yet humane views. We work to uphold the equal enjoyment of human rights and civil liberties in an open, secular society and maintain it is a civic duty to participate in the democratic process and a planetary duty to protect nature's integrity, diversity, and beauty in a secure, sustainable manner.

Thus engaged in the flow of life, we aspire to this vision with the informed conviction that humanity has the ability to progress toward its highest ideals. The responsibility for our lives and the kind of world in which we live is ours and ours alone.

Matthew 5:1-10; 17; 43-48 (KJV with some interpretative adaptation)

Blessed are the poor in spirit:

for theirs is the realm of eternal satisfaction.

Blessed are they that mourn : for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the realm of eternal peace.

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy , but to fulfill.

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Heavenly Father: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.

For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye ? Do not even the harsh and greedy tax collectors the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? Do not even those deceptive tax collectors also? Be ye therefore completely virtuous, even as your Heavenly Father exemplifies perfected virtue.

Sermon

I love humanism! I am a humanist through and through. That section of the Humanist manifesto I just read, "guided by reason, inspired by compassion, informed by experience" YES! That's great by me.

If I want to figure out the age of the universe, I'm not going to the Bible to consult the first chapter of Genesis. I'll consult an astronomer or an astro-physicist. I'm going to get my telescope out and look up the sky.

If I want to understand the beginnings of humanity, I'm not going to scoop up some clay and ponder how God animated it. I'll first look at the theory of evolution. And not the intelligent design version that suggests an unseen hand directing it. Yes, there are many unsolved mysteries in the amazing process of the evolution of life, but as we learn more, we always discover natural explanations that don't require supernatural intervention. Homo Sapiens are not the result of a supernaturally guided process. If that was true, God could have done a far better job than she did given all the problems with these bodies and the problems we've created for ourselves and the planet!

Humanism forms an excellent non-religious basis for ethics to serve human interests and needs in a pluralistic society. Through reason and experience, we can develop a rational basis for those ethics.

While there are historical traces of wisdom in the Biblical laws, many are quite obsolete. We can apportion justice far better than an eye for an eye. No one ought to suffer harsh judgment for eating lobster and shrimp. In a complex, industrialized society, we can leave behind Biblical, patriarchal, social organization and move toward equality of the sexes.

Speaking of women, humanism has a far better approach to birth control. Seeing all those religious men testifying in front of congress recently about what women should and shouldn't do about birth control underlines this point. So much of traditional religion reflects male interests rather than female interests.

So I hope you hear, loud and clear, how much I affirm the humanist point of view. It's all good ... but it hasn't been enough for me.

Why not?

Let's look at the case of a woman with an unwanted or problem pregnancy. In the unwanted case, the pregnancy could be the result of rape or incest; the woman may be a teenager, not physically or emotionally ready to be a mother. In the problem case, prenatal testing may reveal an health compromising defect in the fetus.

Science and humanism can be very helpful to the woman to understand her options and what the expected outcomes might be. The focus will be on the quality of life of the woman and the probable quality of life for the fetus. A humanistically oriented health care provider will bring compassion to her decision-making process rather than judgment and obligation.

Yet in making the actual decision to bring the pregnancy to term or not, humanism falls silent. Reason may say one thing but the emotions may say something very different. An inner sense may restrain or encourage action that may be completely unreasonable. The woman needs access to inner resources to sort this out ... that humanism doesn't provide.

Another place humanism may fall silent is in figuring out whether to make a big change in one's life. Let's say a successful lawyer or stock broker, finds her or his work becoming unsatisfying. The money or status loses its luster. Maybe something inside that person urges him or her to find work that is more service centered. In this example, such a change could mean a significant loss of earning power, lowering the family's standard of living, and putting the children's chances of getting into an elite college at risk. The partner in the relationship doesn't like this potential change at all. Humanism can help rationally analyze the choices, but doesn't know how to value the inner movement happening in that person or how to explore and listen to it.

My humanism falls short, too, in the goal of eliminating racism, sexism, ableism, and all the oppressions of historically marginalized people. Yes, humanism does a great job of showing that we are all equal in our genetic inheritance, none are a biologically superior species. Reason goes a long way to analyze the systematic nature of oppression, how it is propagated, and how it can be neutralized. We can understand rationally and agree wholeheartedly to fight oppression.

Yet our inner bias can remain. Unseen and unrecognized, it can lurk, inherited from our family, our culture, our class, or our community. It is a social infection easily picked up on the playground at school that can lay dormant for many years in one's emotional memory.

Rationally we can decide not to be a racist. Yet our emotions may not cooperate, and may unconsciously undermine our effort. In my experience, humanism hasn't had the inner resources to work with the affective dimension of human experience ... and heal it.

Let me repeat, humanism has much useful guidance for us. When we get to the limits of our own experience, humanism has wonderful exemplars to follow. If I want to look outward and understand the solar system, Copernicus has an answer. If I want to understand the law of gravity, Galileo has an answer. If I want to understand relativity and the relation of energy and matter, Einstein has a formula for it. Even looking inward, Freud can help us start mapping the pathologies of the brain.

Humanism and science have a genius for outer observation. What I'm seeking is a genius for inner observation, for exploring our inner lives. The Greek philosophers were great. The Oracle of Delphi commanded, "Know thyself!" The Buddha was very wise in mapping the terrain of the inner world and how to find liberation from stress and suffering.

What about Jesus? Could Jesus be a helpful guide looking inward?

I think Jesus has a lot to teach us about our inner world.

First, I think Jesus has a lot to teach us about oppression. Jesus was a marginalized person as a Jewish Palestinian suffering under Roman occupation. His people groaned under their tax burden. His birth happened on a forced march to Bethlehem so they can be counted for tax purposes.

Remarkably, Jesus resists being defined by his oppression. Almost all the Jesus scholars agree he brought a message about the Baselia of God, translated as the Realm or Kingdom of God. Think of this as a definition of what a just social order would look like. In every definition of the Baselia of God, there is an implicit contrast with the Roman Empire's social order.

Imagine the courage his hearers might have taken from Jesus saying the Realm of God was like a mustard seed. The tiniest of seeds, as any first century farmer knew, could overwhelm a field. Such was the implicit, covert power of this vision of the Realm of God to conquer Roman oppression.

Stories of Jesus relating to the despised of that time, the centurion, the tax collector, the prostitute, the leper, the poor and the sick, stand out of the record. He openly debated the Pharisees and the priests. He praised the Samaritans, who were hated by the Jews as apostates. No one was outside his willingness to heal and teach. From this openness and engagement, we recognize Jesus as one who offered unconditional love to all comers.

The concept of unconditional love has profound implications for one's inner life. That kind of love is very hard to find in this world. We all have our self interests that limit our compassion. Nature doesn't protect the weak, the sick and the vulnerable, far from it. The hungry eagle seeks the lost chick. The lion fells the aging gazelle. The competition among

rams butting heads doesn't go to the feeble.

Jesus had a radically different vision of human society than dog eat dog. Blessed are the poor, those that mourn, the meek, those who seek to do right. They will be satisfied, comforted, filled and inherit the earth. The reward will go to the merciful, the pure in heart and the peacemaker not the conqueror. Jesus turns the natural order upside down. Love rules in Jesus' vision, not power.

The experience of feeling that kind of love brings tremendous peace to the inner spirit. The woman deciding whether to terminate a life process in her womb can find great comfort opening her heart to that love. That love will be there irregardless of the decision she makes – that's what unconditional means. The lawyer or stockbroker exploring their inner life will also take great comfort from that love as they discern whether to stay where they are or to make the leap to a new life. And opening to that love *may influence* what they choose to do or not do. That love may have an inner wisdom that the rational mind cannot fathom.

This kind of approach to life and the message of Jesus I'm talking about isn't Trinitarian Christianity. This is Unitarian Christianity. This is Universalist Christianity. The focus is human centered.

The Baselia of God described what the world would look like if Jesus' Jewish understanding of God was in charge rather than empire. This was a lived vision of how people should get along with each other *here and now*, not a description of some heavenly abode in the clouds, a reward beyond the grave. Many early Christians understood the resurrection story *as a restoration of paradise in this world* through the work of the church. Jesus had a vision of the beloved community to be enacted on earth.

Now, clearly, Jesus doesn't have all the answers for every problem. If I want to design a rocket to explore *outer space*, I'm not going to consult the Gospel of Matthew or Luke. And if someone *did* try to build one that way, I wouldn't be the test pilot. Science will be a far better source for that project.

If, however, I'm looking for a resource to help me explore *inner space*, Jesus is going to be a helpful guide. Not just Jesus but the many people who have reflected on his life and teachings over the last 2000 years may also have useful wisdom and guidance for us.

If you want to learn about universal love, it is wise to study those who embodied it.

If you want to learn about creating a beloved community, it is wise to consider Jesus' vision of the Realm of God.

If you want to learn to embody justice, fairness and equality, it is wise to study his parables.

Jesus is not the only way to do this of course. Psychology and Philosophy both have much to teach us too. The Jewish prophets are another great source of inspiration. I personally have found the Buddha's teaching very enlightening.

My point today is Jesus is good too. Amazingly good too.

Humanists are welcome in our Unitarian Universalist congregations.

Christians are welcome in our Unitarian Universalist congregations.

There is plenty of room here too for Christian Humanists who follow and take inspiration from Jesus without worshiping him as a God.

Whatever our source of inspiration, may we take seriously the urge toward inner exploration that leads to our growth and development in the service of life, and for the service of life.

Benediction

I conclude with a little scripture, Philippians 4:8-9, (also known as The Christian Humanist Manifesto)

Finally, brethren,

whatsoever things are true,
whatsoever things are honest,
whatsoever things are just,
whatsoever things are pure,
whatsoever things are lovely,
whatsoever things are of good report;

if there be any virtue,
and if there be any praise, think on these things.

Those things, which ye have both learned, and
received, and heard, and seen in me, do:

and the God of peace shall be with you.