

READINGS

Curtis Reese, early Humanist minister in Des Moines, Iowa:

Humanism aims to comprehend humanity in our total setting; to know ourselves as children of the cosmos, as the individual members of the human group, and as the parents of civilizations yet to be. It sets as its definite goal, not knowledge for its own sake but knowledge as a means to the enrichment of human life. Here it attacks its problems with evangelical fervor and summons to its cause all knowledge, all faith, all hope, and all love.

John Dietrich:

"It does not frighten me to know that the universe has made me a part of its teeming, abundant life; that the same power that is breaking the lilacs into leaf is breaking me into a fuller flower of personality I am content to be a brother to the leaves, the flowers, the trees, and all the strange and beautiful world in which I dwell It does not sadden me to realize that for a little while the cosmic urge voices itself in this strange community of busy particles which I call myself. In me, in you, the Universe has spoken." ["On Life's Renewal," an Easter address (#957)]

A Congregation of Philosophers: Freethought in a Post-Denominational World"
A talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
at Unitarian Universalist Society, Coralville, IA
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Introduction

The Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi (370 to 287 BCE) told this story:

Once three friends were discussing life. One said:

"Can people live together and know nothing of life,
work together and produce nothing?
Can people fly around in the air
and forget to exist,
forever and ever?"

The three friends looked at each other and burst out laughing.

They had no explanation, and so
they were better friends than before.

Then one of the friends died.

Upon hearing of the death, Confucius sent a disciple
to help the two remaining friends
chant the funeral obsequies.

Upon arrival, the Confucian found that one of the friends had composed a song,
and the other was playing a lute.

The two friends sang:

"Hey, Sung Hu, where'd you go?
Hey, Sung Hu, where'd you go?
You have gone where you really were all along,
And we are here, damn it, we are here!"

When the Confucian heard this
he burst into the room and said,

"May I inquire where you found this
in all the books of funeral obsequies,
this silly singing in the presence
of the dearly departed?"

The two friends looked at each other and burst out laughing.

One said, "Poor fellow! He doesn't know the new liturgy!"

(Adapted from a translation by Thomas Merton)

I should explain that in many Daoist tales, the Confucians are the butt of the jokes. Confucians were (and are) all about formal ritual and decorum. Daoists, by contrast, believe in going with the flow and going with the moment. So, Daoist stories tend to underline spontaneity and creativity, contrasted against Confucian uptightness.

The three friends asked some meaty questions:

"Can people live together and know nothing of life,
work together and produce nothing?
Can people fly around in the air
and forget to exist,
forever and ever?"

The three friends looked at each other and burst out laughing.

They had no explanation, and so
they were better friends than before.

That, I think, fairly well sums up the project of Humanist gatherings. We agree with the American poet Yusef Komunyakaa, poet: "it's not what we know, it's what we can risk discovering."

And our take on the formality of previous religious traditions: "Poor fellow! He doesn't know the new liturgy!"

It is the work of Humanism and freethought to create a new liturgy. A liturgy that gets past the hubris of calling ourselves Children of God; a liturgy that underlines and examines the fact that we are children of the cosmos, as Curtis Reese put it.

We gather to share values and world-views. We gather to do the work of religion which the Humanist theologian Anthony Pinn defines as "a way of interrogating human existence."

And also to laugh about how very little we know.

One

Being freethinker friendly is a lot more than care around “religious” language.

It’s about combating cognitive imperialism. It is about attempting to de-colonize the mind. We live in a cosmopolitan, multicultural, multi-religious world. We live in a nation where Christianity has split into two broad camps: liberal and conservative. (The recent running battle between Pete Buttigieg and Mike Pence well summarizes that split.)

The ancient Hebrews and ancient Greeks were wonderfully creative people, but so were all the other peoples on the planet. Finally, the question is: Will we in the Western world allow those two groups to do our thinking for us for the rest of human history?

Or might we struggle free of those assumptions, which permeate and saturate Western thinking?

Can we find a new liturgy and a new way of being “religious”?

I believe that we need to try.

Humanism is not a Western invention. Humanism has existed for at least five thousand years in sects of Hinduism; in Ubuntu; in Daoism, and Confucianism. It isn’t an invention of Unitarians in the early twentieth century, except in name, but occurred in Jewish thought with Felix Adler, and in the African American tradition with Frederick Douglas and W.E.B. Dubois.

We sometimes forget that all religious traditions start somewhere and at some time. Those who believe there is an ancient and immutable concept of deity just haven’t looked into the DNA of the various gods.

We have a version of the beginning of Christianity in the Book of Acts in Christian scripture, which is properly titled “The Acts of the Apostles” (or in Greek, *Praxeis*

Apostolon). The book was written somewhere between 80 and 90 of the Common Era and contains the triumphalist story of the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire.

Chapter 17 contains a narrative of the meeting of the older traditions and Christianity from the Christian point of view:

Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus (note: the hill in Athens where government met) and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. (NRSV 21-25)

In coming to Athens, the epicenter of Greek philosophy, Paul's task was to convince the Athenians that they needed a transcendent god—a god above and outside of nature who is in charge of all things; this sort of god, Paul argued, is the only sort of god that can establish morality and meaning.

One thing that is important to recognize is that the product that Paul was—if you will—*selling* at Athens was not an ancient god but a brand spankin' new hybrid of the Hebrew god that had been developing and changing over millennia and a new type of god fresh off the Silk Road out of Persia.

All gods start somewhere. Paul was creating a new sort of god right before the eyes of the Athenians.

As Paul and his listeners in Athens well knew, philosophy and theology are not merely talk about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin or the "meta" of the "meta." Theology and philosophy are the methods by which each of us constructs a worldview. And a life-stance. Philosophy and theology are where we find hope and meaning and purpose.

A creed-less tradition such as Unitarian Universalism requires, as I titled my talk today, "A Congregation of Philosophers." That's how we support each other's journeys toward meaning and wholeness.

Two

Allow me to point out that when people are arguing about the existence of "god" or the historicity of Jesus or Mohammad, what these folks are actually examining is this: Will these concepts carry the weight of human suffering?

The question of deity boils down to this: Is there any management at this hotel?

Can you ring the front desk and ask for extra towels, and, by-golly, here they come; or do you have to get your own darn towels?

Paul taught the former; Humanism embraces the latter.

There are—broadly speaking—three types of gods that occur in human thought. A *transcendent* god is outside and above all things. In this way of seeing reality, there is a material world—a world of the flesh as it's often called by Paul—and a world of spirit—the realm of God and the angels and heaven and a throne and pearly gates and that sort of thing. With a transcendent god, the hotel *has* management. You can ask for towels and, if it pleases management to do so, you will get towels.

The polar opposite of the transcendent god is an *immanent* god. With an "i." The word *immanent* derives from the Latin word *immanens*, meaning "to remain in." This sort of god exists in the material world and is most likely the oldest form of human god—the gods are in the trees and the rocks and animals and clouds, and on and on. This is called pantheism.

With this sort of management, you have to go get your own darn towels. The management is everything—you, the towels, the hotel, and your idea that you need extra towels.

Then, there is third type of god which begins in the material realm but is more than—an *emergent* god. With an "e." From the Latin *emergentem*, "to rise out of." In this vision, there's no—for example—pearly gates or throne, but there is a spiritual realm that we can't see (but we can *feel*) that permeates the material cosmos.

This vision appears to have originated in Hindu thought. The question about this sort of god is whether it only does things like bring out the leaves in spring, or does it do other things as well, as in affecting human history.

With this sort of hotel management, you can call for extra towels if you are so inclined, but the ultimate knowledge is understanding that you don't need extra towels anyway: you already have all the towels you need.

(That's a quick summary of the *Bhagavad Gita*, btw.)

So, there are—broadly speaking—three types of gods in human thought:
Above-and-outside;
in-and-only-in;
and in-and-emergent from.

Are all Humanists atheists? No. Atheism and Humanism have a very troubled relationship, but it's too late for a marriage counselor.

Humanism is not about the existence or non-existence of various gods; Humanism is about *how we do life*.

Humanists tend to choose between the last two types of gods I mentioned, and many of us consider that the word "nature" is a whole lot more useful than the freighted word "god."

As the humanist architect Frank Lloyd Wright put it, "I believe in God, only I spell it N-a-t-u-r-e."

Three

John Dietrich, often called the father of religious humanism, was not a "Harvard man" as were so many Unitarian ministers in his day. Dietrich attended a small college in Pennsylvania. Was ordained in the Reformed tradition. And was defrocked because of his heresy. He became a Unitarian, served the congregation in Spokane, and slowly became a Humanist through reading British humanist publications. Dietrich was called as Senior Minister to First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis in 1916 specifically because he was a Humanist.

That is the congregation where I now serve as Senior Minister. The congregation has practiced what Dietrich called “religious humanism” and I call “congregational humanism” ever since—103 years at this point.

The insight of Dietrich and Curtis Reese—a Unitarian minister in Des Moines, a contemporary and Humanist co-conspirator with John Dietrich, also not a “Harvard man,” and the first president of the American Humanist Association—was that “church” could be done without reference to Christian language. A new liturgy.

A de-colonized liturgy.

Conclusion

What is the good news of Humanism?

There are three claims for Humanist thought that Curtis Reese makes in that reading for this morning:

1. We must realize that we are “children of the cosmos.”
2. We must act lovingly and responsibly as *social* animals.
3. We must realize (and live into) our obligation to secure the future of humanity, the planet, and all living beings.

That, as I see it, is the call of Humanism: to live in compassionate relationship with yourself, others, and all living things.

Humanism insists that we are human because we are in *relationship*.

This is both our meaning and our purpose, and this commitment necessarily means we are living for something greater than ourselves. Not something that we can achieve perhaps, but we realize that it is not outcome but process that matters.

Here. Now.

We are alive because of others—before us and with us now. Our lives must help insure the flourishing of what comes after.

Our call is to move from the fuzzy and confused values we learn in the flea market of emotions, social norms, and social values that swirl around us in our culture, to clear values. Clarified values that can serve us as truth, meaning, and purpose.

The work of Humanism is firstly the work of liberation. First of our own minds. Then those around us. And on. And on in larger circles.

The work of Humanism is secondly the work of liberation: Until all of humanity is free to change their life circumstances—to free themselves from what they feel they must be free of—our work is not complete.

It's a process!

The work of Humanism is—as the First Humanist Manifesto put it—living a shared life in a shared world and working toward greater sharing.

The work of Humanism is multicultural and multiracial and pluralist and secular. We insist that religion and government mix like oil and water.

The work of Humanism is paradoxical: we insist upon the in-born right of all to dignity and justice—a universal value—while at the same time insisting that human cultures are equally valid—a pluralist value.

The work of Humanism is the work of hope. Not the hope of far off places in other realms or the hope of a necessary outcome, but the hope of here, now—in the process.

Relationship. Connection. We continue to ask, as those old Daoists did:

“Can people live together and know nothing of life,
work together and produce nothing?
Can people fly around in the air
and forget to exist,
forever and ever?”

As John Dietrich said:

It does not frighten me to know that the universe has made me a part of its teeming, abundant life . . .

We sing along with those two Daoist friends:

“Hey, Sung Hu, where’d you go?

...

You have gone where you really were all along.”

SOURCES

Zhuangzi story adapted from a translation by Thomas Merton.

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The Unitarian Universalist Humanist Association "Freethinker Friendly" program:

<http://huhumanists.org/programs/freethinker-friendly>

www.FirstUnitarian.org