

***Congregational Humanism:
Religious? Reverent? Ethical? Rational?***

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When I gave up on religion at age 19, I grieved. But I said to myself: “Self, buck-up. Let it go. C’mon that stuff’s not rational.” And ever since that day I have basked in the glory of *pure reason*, guided only by the light of science, with faith that someday all human beings would be liberated from prejudice and dogma, become fully informed, and act in accordance with the good of all – which is, of course, their own highest good as well.”

“Self,” I said to myself, “that’s a vision worthy for your life, your youthful energy, and all of your gorgeous blond hair. Let’s go for it.”

In 1933, in a grand vision of how the world could be, an assortment of prominent educators, philosophers, and liberal ministers came together to draft “A Humanist Manifesto.” They did not call it “The” Humanist Manifesto, as if they held the conceit that they could define this broadly used term -- but they crafted this document to declare that there could be a “Religious” Humanism which would, without reliance upon any supernatural power or deity, call the world to its best self.

I had never heard of “Religious Humanism” until several years after my moment of epiphany, which I mentioned a moment ago, the moment when I realized that everything I had ever learned about religion was nonsense ... but that my aspirations to save the world were still on target.

In the course of those intervening years, several things went seriously wrong. My newly found grounding in reasonableness somehow failed to prevent me, for example, from a getting married too young and to the wrong person. But what if? I wondered. I really liked wondering. I still like to wonder. Don’t you like to wonder? What if, I wondered, my faith in humanity could be restored? What if my faith in reason and science and just doggone commonsense fairness and do unto others...?

That’s when I saw the ad in the paper for a gathering of the American Humanist Association. Remember, at that point I had never heard of a Religious Humanist. In the back of my mind though, there was probably floating a vague sense that “secular humanists” were widely known being the cause of America’s moral decline ... so I figured it might be for me.

And that’s how I stumbled upon Unitarianism for the first time, because the Humanists were meeting at the First Unitarian Society in Minneapolis. Better known as F.U.S. I didn’t know what a “Society” was. It looked like a church, and it smelled like a church. But I was sure glad that it wasn’t called a church. I took a look at the Unitarian Society’s flyer describing itself and was pretty sure this would be a good fit. There were the UU principles and sources, their

progressive vision, and a description of humanism emphasizing concern with the here and now rather than the hereafter, guided not by fear of an ancient god, but by concern for humanity.

I have visited, preached at, read about, and shared stories with ministers of UU congregations all over the country. I do not know of any who more emphatically identifying themselves as “humanist,” than FUS. It’s the only place I’ve been where the criteria for a good sermon was that it had to mention both Nitchze and The Illliad and include a word that you’d want to rush home to look up in the dictionary. So it was a good place to get some grounding in this new perspective -- this “Religious Humanism” -- even though it was not much different from what had been my atheism. No, I take that back, it was *a lot* different; I was no longer alone.

Before long I came to the conclusion that this bizarre juxtaposition of “religion” without God was freaking awesome! I remembered, then, that there *was a lot that I had liked* about my church days of yore. Back then, of course, the music pretty much sucked, but I *liked* to sing. The community were a bit priggish, but they were *my* prigs. And the ethical inquiry *led directly to pre-ordained* conclusions, but they *were asking the right questions*: How should I spend my life? Who can I trust? What does it mean to love?

So I was ok with the term “religious humanism.” In fact, I embraced it. And still today I use it, though I try so hard to avoid using incomplete labels. It would be more meaningful, in some cases, to say that I’m an atheistic christian, but those words are so laden with baggage that most people are unwilling to unpack.

A couple of weeks ago I went to the FUS website and noticed that while the phrase “religious humanism” is still quite prominent, there’s another phrase being used: “Congregational Humanism.” This is a term I’d never come across before, but once again, just seeing the juxtaposition of those words was an ah-hah moment.

It caused me to reflect on the trajectory of our UU heritage from a largely intellectual sense of identity toward, gradually, more of a community-oriented identity. We can see a bit of this trajectory in the words of one of the first Unitarians, William Ellery Channing, in 1830, compared to the words of a late 20th century Unitarian scholar, James Luther Adams. Channing speaks about the meaning of the *free mind*. Adams honors Channing by using a *parallel form*, but with his words, Adams invites us to reconsider our focus. Let’s read these together, one at a time.

#592 “The Free Mind”

I call that mind free which masters the senses, 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 or hereditary 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 human opinion: Which refuses to be the slave or tool of the many or the few, and guards its empire over 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 images 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, and which no menace or peril can enthrall: Which is calm in the midst of tumults, and possesses itself, though all else be lost.

#591, “The Free Church”

I call that church free which enters into covenant with the ultimate source of existence, That sustaining and transforming power not made with human hands. It binds together families and generations, protecting against the idolatry of any human claim to absolute truth or authority. This covenant is the charter and responsibility and joy of worship in the face of death as well as life.

I call that church free which brings individuals into a caring, trusting fellowship, That protects and nourishes their integrity and spiritual freedom; that yearns to belong to the church universal; It is open to insight and conscience from every source; it bursts through rigid tradition, giving rise to new and living language, to new and broader fellowship.

It is a pilgrim church, a servant church, on an adventure of the spirit. The goal is the prophethood and priesthood of all believers, the one for the liberty of prophesying, the other for the ministry of healing. It aims to find unity in diversity under the promptings of the spirit "that bloweth where it listeth . . . and maketh all things new."

Just looking at the FUS website today, it was not immediately clear how the phrase, “congregational humanism” was being used there, or if it was being used anywhere else. But this seemed worthy of some investigation, because I may have been using the *same label*, “religious humanist,” for a long time, but I don’t think my *religious perspective* has remained the same this whole time. And “congregational humanism” has a ring to it, I think, of a more expansive vision than I had 28 years ago.

When people first encounter, and begin to explore, Unitarian Universalism, unless they're infants, they are often in something of a rejection mode -- not petulant, exactly, but fed up with being told what to believe. They are in search, rather, for an affirmation of self-reliance. I find this to be especially true among the WWII generation and Baby Boomers. This corresponds to our movement's strong humanist orientation in the late 20th century. But today, I find this contrarian combativeness to be much milder among millennials, who, I think, have been less likely to have religion rammed down their throats ... and this, I believe, will help us to see our way into a gentler, and less defensive, Unitarian Universalism for the 21st century.

My personal trajectory as a UU began with a determined drive for religious liberty on both personal and political levels. Over the course of almost 3 decades, this drive has not grown tired or weak, but it has, at least I hope it has, become simultaneously *more confident, and more humble*, and has shifted from a demand for independence into a quest to understand my *interdependence* with you and with the web of all existence.

And I'm not just talking about pragmatic interdependence -- about how we need one another and how we're better together. I'm talking about *existential interdependence* -- that we do not even exist separate from our web of relationships with one another, with the flora and fauna, with the land, and sea, and sky. Our choices, sacred as they are, cannot be made without consequence for these others.

Well, the term "congregational humanism" is too small to capture all of that. But any religious language, or philosophical or poetic language, *or any language at all* is too small to capture the fullness of truth, beauty, and goodness.

So I wrote to my colleague at FUS to ask if the phrase, "congregational humanism," was being used widely there, and where it had come from. I wondered if he or anyone else had preached on the topic or developed anything further about what it could mean to our liberal religious movement today. I get the sense that this phrase is still in its infancy. There are a dozen or so hits on Google, but these generally refer to "congregational humanism" as "religious humanism" by another name -- *possibly a more accessible name* for some ... and less accessible, for others.

INTERLUDE - TREBLE VOICES ENSEMBLE

Would you Harbor Me?

As I'm not keen on labels, I'm certainly not inclined to self-identify as a congregational humanist, especially since, unlike religious humanism, the concept hasn't been subject to deep inquiry and loving criticism. It has caused me to reflect tho, on why, even if there exists a phenomenon called "humanism," there have to be people called "humanists."

Still congregational humanism seems to me to have the potential to highlight the reality that our highest aspirations will always remain up there in never-never land, if they are not grounded and tested in community. The coolest ideas in the world (and I've had many of them) are ill-conceived if they only make sense within the context of my own mind.

The deep growth one might experience in butting-out as a spiritual practice ... can't really happen when we're alone.

It's not that any congregation contains the fullness of human community – especially the homogenous congregations that currently exist within our denomination ... or any other denomination for that matter, where there's not only demographic diversity, but genuine political diversity and the almost unfathomable range of religious and philosophical perspectives.

All that's not going to occur within a single congregation. But it's like the imperative that we “think globally, act locally.” Or “bloom where we're planted.” Or, “work within our own spheres of influence.” No congregation is going to provide opportunities to practice learning and loving within the full breadth of human community past, present, and future. And social media, so far anyway, has done little more than reinforce our small circles of shared ideologies. Even when we interact online with people who think differently, even if we refrain from calling them names, it's not the same as actually having to spend time in the same room and to make decisions together like whether to use real or almond milk. And I'm not kidding about this. Yes, on one level it's a trivial example, and maybe has a simple solution I could share when talking to kids, “let's have both!” But the answers are not so simple when we're making decisions that involve limited resources ... or sharing a mission with others who prefer incompatible strategies.

So the challenges of congregational life are not as large as we sometimes make them out to be. We sometimes get in pissing matches here because we don't dare take on anything more important. But at the same time, it's helpful to return to basics, sometimes, rather than to spend every moment in the cauldron out there. To retreat at least for a little while. Not to utopia, but to a place where our principles can be practiced in the context of little waves, before we go back out into the storm. One last example: it's been said that if you want to learn how to forgive, don't start with the Nazis.

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I've seen “humanism” attached to several other adjectives: mystical humanism, reverent humanism, Christian humanism ... these are all meaningful, I think.

I appreciate these words, for example, from scientist and rabble rousing atheist, Richard Dawkins: *We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones. Most people are never going to die because they are never going to be born. The potential people who could have been here in my place but who will in fact never see the light of day outnumber the sand grains of Arabia. Certainly those unborn ghosts include greater poets than Keats, scientists than Newton. We know this because the set of possible people allowed by our DNA so massively exceeds the set of actual people. In the teeth of these stupefying odds it is you and I, in our ordinariness, that are here.*

And these words, from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, an accomplished scientist and Catholic priest: *“Less and less do I see any difference now between research and adoration.”*

I'm going to invite you now into a rather longer period — 5 minutes — of silent meditation. People delve into the silence in many ways, sometimes in thought, sometimes in prayer, some free their minds by allowing thoughts to float away without clinging to them, some simply notice those colors and textures and bodily sensations immediately present, without attempting to judge or classify or understand, but just to experience.

There is a power to being present with one another in silence. Both as a way to get comfortable to be together when there are no words to express the moment, and also as a practice of setting aside the illusion of our separateness.

I am a terrible judge of passing time, so I've asked Andrea [our pianist] to set a timer and then to gently draw us back together.

MEDITATION / SILENCE (5:00)

And now I'd like to invite your response to the questions I've been raising, in this form: Please share with us, via anecdote, not analysis, a moment of reconciliation between head and heart ... or a moment of sensing existential (rather than pragmatic) interdependence.

[We heard several moving and evocative anecdotes!]

OFFERTORY

SENDING SONG

Let it be a Dance #311

BENEDICTION

Lest we think that Unitarian Universalists are unique, please note that the following phrase appears a lot on progressive Christian websites. "*You may occasionally be led to suspend your intellect. But you will not be required to sacrifice it.*"

I wonder if this could be one (among many) points of connection between those of us who imagine ourselves to be common sense rationalists, and those of us who consider ourselves to be common sense mystics. I wonder if congregational life can be a meeting ground, *not just a physical place*, but *an environment*, in which to explore the ebb and flow of our lives ... through what we think we know ... and that which we love, even though we'll never understand.