

Humanist Study Group

Humanism at UUA

***Why Am I a Humanist?* By Terence J. Madden**

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On December 13, 2009, The New York Times reported this story, *In North Carolina, Lawsuit Is Threatened over Councilman's Lack of Belief in God*. The story read,

Raleigh, N.C. (AP) City Councilman Cecil Bothwell of Asheville believes in ending the death penalty, conserving water and reforming government, but he does not believe in God. His political opponents say that is a sin that makes him unworthy of office, and they have the North Carolina Constitution on their side.

... Raised a Presbyterian, Mr. Bothwell began questioning beliefs at a young age, he said, and considered himself an atheist, by the time he was 20. However, he is an active member of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Asheville, and celebrates Christmas.

... When Mr. Bothwell was sworn into office on Monday, he used an alternative oath that does not require officials to swear on a bible or refer to "Almighty God."

This has riled conservative advocates, who cite a little -noticed quirk in North Carolina's Constitution that disqualifies officeholders "who shall deny the being of Almighty God." The provision was included when the document was drafted in 1868 and was not revised when North Carolina amended its Constitution in 1971.

... Six other states have similar provisions barring atheist officeholders.

Do you have to believe in God to hold office in North Carolina?

According to the North Carolina Constitution, "Yes."

Fortunately, however, this prohibition violates the United States Constitution.

The article says,

Mr. Bothwell cannot be forced out of office over his atheist views because the North Carolina provision is unenforceable, according to the supremacy clause of the Constitution.

At least that is how the nine judges on the Supreme Court have ruled in the past.

Associated with a professed belief in Almighty God is the question, "Can we be good without God? Can we live ethical lives? We know the answer is "yes."

In Religious versus Humanistic Ethics, Kai Nielsen states,

We do not need a God to give meaning to our lives by making us for His Sovereign Purpose... We, by our deliberate acts and commitments, give meaning to our own lives.

Alan Dershowitz in Rights From Wrongs (A Secular Theory of the Origin of Rights) states it more directly:

It is because there is no morality beyond human invention that we must devote so much energy to the task of building morality, law, and rights. We cannot endure without morality, law, and rights, yet they do not exist unless we bring them into existence.

What do people call people who don't believe that rights come from God?

A lot of nasty things, including sinners, devil worshippers, and communists. Some of the better terms are: atheists, freethinkers, humanists. They are always referred to as "those others."

In a Unitarian Universalist church in Michigan like New Hope, “those others” are “you.” Are you one of the devil worshipping atheists, the communistic freethinkers, the damned to Hell sinning humanists? YOU LOOK SO NORMAL!

A Freethinker was a 19th century term used to describe the most popular public speaker of his day, Robert Ingersoll, who relished being called “The Great Agnostic. “Atheists” has been a term around for a long time but is currently popular to describe bestselling authors like Richard Dawkins (The God Delusion), Daniel Dennett (Breaking the Spell), and Christopher Hitchens (God Is Not Great). To speak with disdain of a Humanist” is to mean a person who is an intellectual snob, who thinks he/she is too good to be part of the Abrahamic tradition of the Book. I think of a humanist as an atheist without the rough edges, or without a chip on his or her shoulder.

I am a Humanist. And today I would like to explain why.

The American Humanist Association defines Humanism as, a rational philosophy informed by science, inspired by art, and motivated by compassion. Affirming the dignity of each human being, it supports liberty and opportunity consonant with social and planetary responsibility. Free of theism and other supernatural beliefs, humanism thus derives the goals of life from human need and interest rather than from theological or ideological abstractions, and asserts that humanity must take responsibility for its own destiny.

There are three components in this definition that I would like to examine this morning, namely:
Humanism is:

- *A rational philosophy*
- *Derives the goals of life from human need and interest*
- *Asserts that humanity must take responsibility for its own destiny.*

1. Humanism is a rational philosophy that emphasizes this world and this life. There is no dependence on the supernatural. There is no afterlife. Informed by reason and the scientific method of inquiry, inspired by art and the creative achievements of many, and motivated by compassion for those who are struggling, humanism strives to make a better world. The emphasis is not on the question of a prime mover but on the primary reasons for living.

Roughly as many Americans accept the bible’s creation story as they do evolution. I am no scientist but I know that we are evolving in our understandings of this planet and of this universe, and that natural selection and the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin is a reliable model upon which to base our understanding about how life has evolved on Planet Earth.

Jonathan Weiner in The Beak of the Finch, says,

Just by looking at these birds (finches), three generations of biologists felt as if they could almost see evolution in action. - once Darwin had opened their eyes to the process.

Sometimes it takes a professor or attending a class in order to begin to “Open one’s eyes.” Don Skiff, the author of The Class (and a member of New Hope) writes in his novel of a student who comes of age and begins to question, to doubt, in other words to think for himself. The college student named Rich Williams learns the difference between a “boundary” and a “horizon.” Rick Williams is coming to realize that organized belief systems like most Christian denominations are “mostly closed to inquiry that might threaten their security.” Don in his novel says, “Their limits can be thought of as boundary walls.”

A religion need not have boundaries. A religious community, like the one here at New Hope, includes anyone who professes to be a part of it, and no individual or group can define its limits. It is the individual’s quest for truth which opens one’s vision to look to the horizon. And that horizon is not a static end point but continues to move as the individual moves in his or her search for meaning in life.

Humanism is a philosophy of open, continuous inquiry.

2. Humanism derives the goals of life from human need and interest.

Michael Sandel, in Justice (What’s the Right Thing To Do?) explains how a give and take is essential in coming to an understanding of our morality,

Moral reflection is dialectical - it moves back and forth between the judgments we make in concrete situations and the principles that inform those judgments.

Alan Dershowitz says,

We can improve on the Ten Commandments, because we have much more human experience on which to base our rules than did the men who wrote the Bible. There are no divine laws of morality, merely human laws claiming the authority of God.

Humanism is dialectical. It's constantly weighing new evidence and seeks for ways to improve our understanding.

3. Humanism asserts that humanity must take responsibility for its own destiny.

Global warming is not a gift from God to allow us to wear swimsuits in the winter. Global warming is a man made threat to Earth's fragile ecosystem that needs a global consensus of men and women from all around the globe to combat.

Last Thursday I attended a workshop on Climate Change co-sponsored by the University of Michigan. I learned that in Antarctica, there is no native population. No one permanently lives there. Only scientists and visitors come to Antarctica. The Antarctic treaty was signed in 1959 by twelve countries; to date, forty-six countries have signed the treaty. The treaty prohibits military activities and mineral mining and supports scientific research. The research going on there is ensure that we will take responsibility for our own destiny by trying to figure out what changing factors in our environment, be it the ice levels, water temperature, CO₂ levels, what factors are cyclical and which are man made that we need to be concerned with.

Humanist is my philosophy and Unitarian Universalism is my affiliation. Although many humanists are unchurched, some belong to the Ethical Culture Society or to secular Jewish organizations like the Society for Humanistic Judaism founded by Sherwin Wine, for whom Suzanne Paul worked. However by far the majority of humanists who are part of a congregation belong to Unitarian Universalism.

How do we confront those who like in North Carolina challenge our right to hold elective office unless we profess belief in their Almighty God. My mentor at The Humanist Institute, a retired UU minister, the Rev. Dr. Sarah Oelberg, answers by saying we need to grow the Humanist movement. But Sarah's way to grow differs from the UUA approach. Sarah's criticism of the Unitarian Universalist Association's recruitment efforts is that the UUA has concentrated too much of its efforts on numbers alone, on expanding the tent of Unitarian Universalism, on a "come on down, we take everyone" approach, and not enough on focusing its efforts on the training and recruitment of enthusiastic members with a passion and a commitment for humanism and UUism.

Sarah's strategy for growth calls for the humanists within Unitarian Universalism to

1. Set the agenda and frame the issues.

The agenda needs to revolve around real moral values which spring from our clear philosophical priorities. As George Lakoff says,

Progressive values are the best of traditional American values. Framing is about getting language that fits your worldview. It is not just language. The ideas are primary - and the language carries those ideas, evokes those ideas.

For example, the value of "choice" at the beginning of life, during one's lifetime, and at the end of life is a critical humanist value. Having the freedom to choose is central to our humanist and UU core value. Choice is a word essential in our vocabulary and to our values.

2. Sell the product.

I used to think this joke was funny,

*What do you get when you cross a UU with a Jehovah's Witness?
Someone out knocking on doors with no apparent reason.*

There's still something funny about it, but if you think about it, it's an insult. Are our actions without purpose? Do we not have a reason for our religion, our coming together? Do we not have a mission?

Sarah Oelberg says that humanist within Unitarian Universalism cannot be laid back but must feel a fire in the belly so that our passion shows. We must be able to articulate why we are humanists and why you should be also.

Maybe liberal congregations with fire should unite. Certainly we would like to work with Gretta Vosper, founder and chair of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity in creating a religious community. She says,

The Church could help us set the ideals by which we wish to live and then challenge us to do so. This would be honorable work and worthy of our energy, allegiance, and support.

There is a future for liberal religious thought and action in America. The seeds of our present and our future began with the Enlightenment.

Russell Shorto in Descartes' Bones says,

Historical periods don't usually name themselves. People walking around circa 1300 did not greet each other with "It's a lovely morning here in the Late Middle Ages." The Enlightenment - whose leaders were nothing if not self-conscious - was an exception. Across Europe, there was an awareness on the part of individuals of somehow having different minds from earlier generations, and everywhere they expressed the idea with the metaphor of light invading what had been darkness.

One of the clearest expressions from the Enlightenment came from the tiny, introverted German philosopher Immanuel Kant (who said) to ground faith not in a church or a holy book but in the human mind, the world, and the relationship between the two. ...

Humanism professes this belief in a dialectic - to ground faith in the human mind, the world, and the relationship between the two.

The motto of the Enlightenment needs to be our motto:

Dare to know. Have the courage to use your own understanding.

Humanism asks as the choir did this morning "Where is the light? Where is the Light? Can you tell me, Where is the light?"

As a humanist, I say the light is inside of me and the light is inside of you. We need this little light of mine and this little light of yours to shine, shine, shine in order to invade what has been darkness.

I challenge YOU to go forth as beacons of light.