

Religious Humanism
An address delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Association General
Assembly 2000
William R. Murry

In every survey of UU's I have seen the majority identify themselves as religious humanists. Religious humanism in Unitarian Universalism now has a history of about 85 years. During that time it has evolved and changed somewhat. I want to mention what I consider to be the eight most important changes between the humanism of approximately the first 70 years and the new humanism that has been emerging for the last 15 or so years. For purposes of discussion I will call them the old and the new humanism. It is the new humanism that we at Meadville Lombard stress with our ministerial students who are humanist, but there is very little here that does not also apply to all our students, humanists and theists alike. These are some of the qualities and values we want our students to emphasize in their future ministries.

First, the old humanism emphasized the single individual with very little emphasis on the importance of the community. Contemporary religious humanism must stress the importance of the covenanted religious community. We are not independent, isolated individuals. We become individuals in community, starting with the community of the family. And we become truly human only in authentic community with others. I define authentic community as people who covenant to walk together for common purposes. A humanistic religious community will be a caring community in which each person cares about and to some extent for others within the community and outside the community as well. Community does not destroy individuality; it makes it possible. The Xhosa of southern Africa have a saying that puts it well. They say, "I am because we are."

If the older humanism over-emphasized the individual and individualism to the neglect of community, the new religious humanism regards the individual as fully human only within community, a community of caring and responsible people. One of the major differences between secular humanism and religious humanism is that religious humanism emphasizes the importance of the covenanted religious community

Second, the old humanism was exceedingly rational often to the point of being rationalistic and ignoring the affective aspect of our humanness. Today's humanism will recognize the importance of the non-rational factors in human experience. We are not only thinking beings; we are also feeling beings, and our feelings, our emotions play an important role in our values and how we got those values. I am a committed social activist because I feel outrage at injustice and oppression and the pain and suffering they bring upon people. I am a humanist in part because of my strong feelings about the suffering of innocent people. However, our feelings ought not to be in the service of irrational beliefs; emotions are non-rational, not necessarily irrational, but they can also feed our rationality.

On the other hand, I reject the current view in our culture that if you feel something, that something has got to have objective reality. I am thinking, for example, of people who say they feel the presence of a loved one who is dead and therefore they say that that person is alive in another world. Or the current fad of believing in angels because you feel that an angel is helping or guiding you. Feelings have to be tested with reason and especially with the principle that a feeling is a personal thing that does not necessarily have its source in objective reality.

I am suggesting that there is a place in religious humanism for emotional expression, the expression of both joy and sorrow, for the expression of love and caring. There is even a place for mystical experience, the feeling of oneness with the universe that many of us sometimes have when we are in the woods or walking along an ocean beach or gazing at the stars on a clear night. Humanism should not be cold and sterile. We can experience emotions and even to some extent be guided by them without giving up the importance of reason. We can express feelings that are not rational but not based on irrational beliefs either. Our emotional life is just as much a part of us as our reason, and if we sometimes regard feelings with suspicion, that is because they are sometimes linked with the irrational.

Humanists are whole people, beings who feel and experience as well as think, and all aspects of our being have a role to play in our humanism.

Third, the old humanism was far too optimistic, seeming to ignore the reality of tragedy and evil in human nature. Religious humanism today needs to take seriously the tragic dimension of life and the role evil often plays in human tragedies. Human beings suffer and die, sometimes prematurely and almost always before we are ready. Sometimes we suffer or die because of humankind's inhumanity to one another. Since the Nazi holocaust we can never again be as optimistic about human nature as the old humanism was. The tragic dimension includes the fact that life and the universe are not necessarily friendly and benevolent to human beings but are really indifferent to us and sometimes even hostile. It includes the fact that life is not necessarily meaningful and purposeful. We must create our own meaning and purpose.

Fourth, if the old humanism seemed closed to a sense of wonder and mystery and to any form of transcendence, the new humanism can be an open humanism--open to wonder and mystery and transcendence in a naturalistic framework. We can admit that there are limits to what human beings can know and understand, and that even things we think we understand can still call forth awe and wonder in us.

If the old humanism tended to be somewhat arrogant, self-assured and even dogmatic, the new humanism can be more modest. Instead of proclaiming "this is

the way things are," we can say "This is how it looks to me." We can speak for ourselves without trying to seem to legislate for others.

And that leads to the fifth point. The new humanism must be tolerant of other perspectives and willing to engage with an open mind in conversation with people who hold other perspectives. In particular I would hate to see humanist regard Unitarian Universalist theists as somehow irrational or inferior. Humanists need to work together with those who have somewhat different views. "Agreed to differ, but resolved to love."

Sixth, the new humanism must understand and appreciate the importance of the aesthetic dimension in religion and in life. The old humanism gave the impression of being rather lacking in aesthetic interests. Services in explicitly humanistic congregations often were simply lectures and discussion sometimes embellished by special music.

Today's religious humanism can appreciate the value of art, poetry, symbols, myth and ritual and of music including congregational singing. I think of such rituals as the lighting of the chalice at the beginning of each service, a visual symbol of the goal of enlightenment and of religious freedom through its history. I think also of the ritual of the sharing of joys and concerns including the lighting of a candle by the person sharing a joy or concern. I believe the sharing of joys and concerns is important to a community of religious humanists because it is a way of building a caring community, community that cares about humans and that after all is what humanism stands for.

The aesthetic dimension speaks to the whole person, not just the mind, and that is why it is so important if religious humanism is to affirm that we are whole persons and if our humanism is to impact our affections. Moreover, I believe that if humanism is to appeal to people other than intellectuals it must speak to the whole person through the arts, through ritual and symbol.

Seven, the old humanism often seemed to deify human beings and in the process ignored other values especially the value of the natural world. Religious humanism today includes an emphasis on the environment, what our seventh principle calls the interdependent web of all existence. Religious humanism must be ecologically conscious, environmentally concerned and committed. We know that if human life is to survive for many more generations, we must honor the natural world far more than humankind has done in recent years. In a word, it is possible to build an environmental ethic on humanist foundations.

Eighth, the old humanism was committed to social justice and to the ideals and values of democracy, but it too often dealt with social justice issues in a paternalistic way. A religious humanism for today and tomorrow must be committed to liberating oppressed people and to economic justice. We ought to have a bias toward the poor and disadvantaged and oppressed. It must be

emphatically committed to women's rights and equality, to gay rights and equality, to economic justice and to opposing racism. Humanism is by definition truly committed to human well being, and that means we must be socially responsible and active in the work of justice.

A religious humanism that emphasizes these eight points answers most of the criticisms leveled at it by postmodernism, the women's movement, and the environmental movement. But it does more than that. It honors its own inner principle, its own fundamental dedication to human betterment.

The goals of religious humanism is fully and truly human beings, people who are free of the fictions and illusions that diminish the self, and who are free and independent within the context of a loving and caring community working together to transform the world. The religious humanist believes that human beings must rely on our own minds and hearts to achieve these goals, but that together we can make progress toward them. The new religious humanism brings together the latest contemporary understandings of what it means to be human with the best values of our liberal religious tradition to achieve that goal.