

Humanisms

Introduction to the Service

At base, a theology is a story of the way the world works, with particular reference to its most powerful aspects: how it was created, how we are supposed to live in it, and what will save us from vicissitudes of life. In spite of the fact that the word “theos”, which means God, looms large in the word, “Theology”, in these later days, a theology does not always include a deity figure, but does always include those powerful questions...“what’s it all about, how do we know what we know? what makes our lives worth living? and so on.

Humanism is the theology that places human interest, human beings, human potential, and the human capacity to ask and answer these questions about truth as the top values in our world, and it says that the meaning of our lives is to develop our potentials, contribute to the common store of love, wisdom, and wealth, and to do what we can to make sure that every precious human being can do the same. It is a very beautiful and meaningful theology and one that many of us share.

It’s been around a while. Socrates was executed for promulgating a version of Humanism, Renaissance Humanists thought of themselves as thoroughly Christian while constructing an educational curriculum which taught men to revere all human knowledge. The Enlightenment was a Humanistic revival, the Existentialists were Humanists and so are lots of socially active religious people of all stripes. “The last thing Our Lord said before he went to heaven was not “believe in me”, but “feed by sheep,” I once heard a tough old nun say. “So I do.” In contrast, the African American Humanist tradition is soundly atheistic. Their motto is, “In an irrational world, those who stand for reason must stand together.”

In the 20th century, the development of Humanism was an especially important part of Unitarian Universalism, with many Humanists among UU congregations and many congregations turning exclusively to Humanist theology, and that also tended to be an atheistic humanism, in which there was no place for God. That Humanism was born of the values of the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution, and still informs the liberal passion for justice and opportunity for all. In the latter years of the 20th century and so far in this one, UU’ism has become more focused on embracing people of many beliefs and creating opportunities for learning, conversation, and spiritual growth in a religiously diverse congregation. Humanism of one kind or another remains a strong strand in our more explicitly multi-faithed denomination.

This morning's service is devoted to exploring in music and words, some of the humanisms that are lively in our congregation...beliefs, practices, and people. The choir will be singing a very interesting mash-up of an ancient Catholic spiritual form, the Mass, with Humanistic texts. New wine in old wineskins! New stories in well-understood formats! Later, we'll talk about the different varieties of humanism and what this word might mean to us. I have asked Roy Moody to join me in the sermon this morning. Roy, as he will tell you, came into this congregation to explore spiritual practice from a secular point of view, has taught many classes and led many groups here which gave folks an opportunity to explore, learn, and discuss Humanism, Naturalism, and spiritual practices which have integrity and usefulness for people who don't believe in any supernatural aspect to the world. First, though...the music.

Humanism

One of the most crucial questions a theology answers is "How do we know what is true?" For questions about this physical world which we share, we rely on our senses, on what works in our lives...like arithmetic, on human knowledge, and we mostly agree...that 10 times 10 is a hundred, that the earth turns steadily at a certain rate, and so on.

In the religious realm, which mostly takes place in our own minds and hearts, it's not so easy to decide how to know what is true. The world's religions over the centuries have had three basic answers to that question. First, there is, "We know what is true because the religious experts tell us what is true." We might call this the Catholic answer. Catholics are expected to believe what the tradition and priestly teachers of the church say is true.

A second basic answer to this question of how do we know what is true, is that we can trust the community and its historic traditions to point us in the right direction because that is how God works in the world. We might call this the Protestant tradition: "The people around me believe that God's word can be found in the Bible, and these are the important teachings of Jesus, and that's what I believe." And if start finding it hard to believe what the people around you believe, you will probably go and find another group to join.

A third basic answer to the question of how do we find out what is true is that we find what is true by our own experience, conscience, reason, and intuition. "I have thought about this, I have searched my own experiences, inner and outer, and come to my own conclusions about what is true."

This third way is the humanistic way. It puts basic trust in individual people to come to their own sense of truth with no need of supernatural intervention. This humanistic strand, this faith in the ability of persons to think for themselves and trust their conclusions, exists to some

extent in every faith. The Catholics have their Jesuits, Protestants respect the call of conscience which sometimes puts individuals at odds with the community, individual experience is a very strong strand of Buddhism, and it is the basic tenet of Unitarian Universalism. Sometimes we say, "We put our faith in you!" Sometimes we say, "You have to think for yourself!" Sometimes we say, with Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind" (and heart).

Some people search their hearts, their experience, their minds, and conclude that there is a God, or a goddess, or a higher power. Some conclude that there is not. Some conclude that Human beings are the highest manifestation of complexity and beauty in our universe.

Unitarian Universalists honor all these manifestations of human beings thinking for themselves. Some UU's come to a humanist theology: they decide to live their lives in a human focused rather than god focused way. Others believe in various spiritual realities which we call by many names. Those decisions and beliefs have different content, and that's ok with us. But they are all humanistic in process...the result of humans puzzling out for themselves what they believe, what they think is important, what gives meaning to their lives, and what spiritual practices sustain them.

Our Mural is a profoundly Humanistic artistic statement, even though it was created by a deeply Catholic artist. It displays symbols of many faiths, interestingly, it adds two symbols which were important to the artist, the Heart of Love and the Star of Inspiration, which could easily be seen as key symbols of the human spirit. All of the symbols are displayed in a way which makes them bigger and more meaningful together than any one would be alone.

Most worship spaces contain only the symbols of one truth, but not this one. We contemplate them all, because we're humanists: we believe that human beings can be trusted to find truth, to learn from others, and come to their own conclusions about the meaning of their own experiences in this beautiful world.

Every set of beliefs has implications for how to live a good life. If you believe that only you can find the truth, the implication is that we should be doing that...that it matters what we believe and that we continue to hone our beliefs through our lives. That's the major thing we offer here, and one of the people who has taken great advantage of that as well as offered that opportunity to others is Roy Moody.