

## **Fifth Source: Humanistic Origins of Unitarian Universalism**

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Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to speak before you again. In a sense, this talk is a continuance of my two previous topics – “Why do Atheists Need Rituals” and “Justice, Equity and Compassion in Human Relations,” each of which contained an obvious humanist bias.

### **“ELEVEN FINGERS”**

When I was a very young boy, and just learning how to count and add, my father played a small trick on me. He said he could prove I had eleven fingers. I argued with him for a while, holding up both hands and counting from 1 to 10, showing my new-found knowledge of which I was so proud, sometimes holding up both hands, pointing out that  $5 + 5$  equals 10. After allowing me some time, he carefully pointed to finger number 10 and asked

“This is number 10, right?”

“Yes”

“And the next is 9.”

“Yes”

“Then 8, 7, and 6”.

“Yes, Yes, Yes”

He repeated

“6?”

“Yes, Yes.”

“How many fingers are on the other hand?”

“Five.”

“How much is  $6 + 5$ ?”

“Eleven.”

“See!?”

My father liked small simple games, and I could see by his face he was acknowledging that there was a trick involved somewhere and he would let me figure it out.

But suppose he was serious? Suppose that his father and his father before him, and so on back through several generations had played this trick with all seriousness. Suppose it had even started as a game but had somewhere gone wrong and turned into a creed. That in the village my ancestors had migrated from in Poland, they believed they had eleven fingers and they could not be swayed by mathematicians. They considered it a “matter of faith.” Perhaps some young virgin had reportedly received this message in front of a burning bush, and that it had been said that those who had not believed in eleven fingers had died horrible and cruel deaths. Perhaps this belief had been inscribed in a book entitled “The Eleven” and contained the words “Whosoever shall not believe in the eleven fingers, shall suffer the fires of hell everlasting.”

Now further suppose that here I am in first grade, and the teacher, using two hands to affirm that five plus five equals 10, encounters my sincere disagreement. I recite my father’s teaching. When the teacher claims it makes no sense and refuses to acknowledge my belief, my religious community comes to my aid, the “Elevenist” faith, insisting that “Elevenism” be taught alongside traditional mathematics as another theory.

Sounds somewhat familiar? Such is the dilemma that humanists are encountering with creationism (not an “ism” at all) – i.e., how to separate fantasy from reality, naturalism from supernaturalism, truth from superstition. I will describe humanism more fully in a moment.

### “CREATIONISM”

The above story of “Elevenism” is an obvious allegory for creationism, so let’s take a brief look at that biggest of lies and deception floating around out there in the land of fantasy and ignorance.

Cynthia and I were recently in England for a wonderful vacation, and we learned that on the day after we arrived, September 14, the Church of England announced its intent to apologize to Charles Darwin for its initial rejection of his theories, nearly 150 years after he published his most famous work, “The origin of the Species”. The Church of England will concede in a statement that it was over-defensive and over-emotional in dismissing Darwin's ideas. It will call the current "anti-evolutionary fervor" an "indictment on the Church". The statement will read, in part, as follows “Charles Darwin: 200 years from your birth, the Church of England owes you an apology for misunderstanding you and, by getting our first reaction wrong, encouraging others to misunderstand you still.” The statement says that in their response to Darwin's theory of natural selection, they repeated the mistakes they made in doubting Galileo's astronomy in the 17th century.

Almost on the same day, a member of the Royal Academy, the UK equivalent of our National Academy of Sciences, announced what appeared to be an endorsement of teaching creationism in schools suggesting, unbelievably, that creationism should be treated “not as a misconception but as a world view”. The member stated “Just because something lacks scientific support doesn’t seem to me a sufficient reason to omit it from the science lesson.” All I could say at the time was “Huh?” I have not been able to come up with another reaction.

Thankfully, the Royal Society forced this professor to resign his membership and it stated, unequivocally, that creationism has no scientific basis and should not be part of a science curriculum. Notably this professor is also an ordained clergyman in the Church of England. Need I say more?

And I won't mention a certain candidate running for public office here in the US who believes that creationism should be taught alongside evolution.

I bring up the creationism argument because it sits at the frontline in the humanist war against ignorance.

### WHAT IS HUMANISM?

It seems like every organization when trying to establish credibility, feels the need to point to their membership, hopefully finding the "big names" that might convince you of the correctness of their dogma, creeds, or beliefs.

Well here goes a brief list, derived from the signers of the "Humanist Manifesto" or by their membership in various humanist organizations, or other sources:

JULIAN HUXLEY, MARGARET SANGER, ABRAHAM MASLOW, ALBERT EINSTEIN, BERTRAND RUSSELL, R.BUCKMINSTER FULLER, ANDREI SAKHAROV, JONAS SALK, ISAAC ASIMOV, RICHARD LEAKEY, KURT VONNEGUT, THOMAS MANN, CARL ORFF, MARGARET ATWOOD

Now, that's done! Are you suitably impressed? I hope not. Now I'd like to toss these away!

The problem is that "correctness by association" is anathema to the humanist. To the humanist, the only proof is reason, and skepticism is the first reaction to something such as reading a list of members.

Similarly, at least in my view, so is the idea of Humanist teachings. I believe that we are our own teachers. Just by remaining skeptical, using reason and logic, we can find all we need to understand about humanism because we are, after all, human. So if you're expecting to hear about humanist teachings, you may be disappointed. You're welcome to see the cashier on your way out and get your money back.

To the humanist, truth has to be intellectually consistent, proven, factual, observable. I'll get back to that also in a minute.

In researching humanism, I found that a broadly-accepted definition of humanism is bound up in an intellectual war of competing egos. In trying to determine the most fitting public definition of humanism, I found myself like a steel ball in a pinball machine, being punted to another location each time I attempted to rest on a particular definition. Religious, secular, Islamic, Christian, Judaic, naturalistic. The list goes on with various individuals or societies each providing their own, so to speak, "unique" definition. Not to be outdone, I decided to develop my own that I feel is more basic and fundamental and is an appropriate starting point for any attempt to define humanism.....

Simply put, "Humanism is the search for truth using the reasoning powers of the human brain." That's all. And notice the words "search for", not "find the".

Most of the literature trying to define humanism only goes a bit further than that by providing examples and incorporating those into their definition, sometimes conflicting with others.

Let me get to an even simpler definition..... "THINK".

Humanism takes courage. There are no comfortable refuges in dogmas or creeds, or in misplaced faith. There is no place you can hide your uncertainty or park your fears. There is only truth as best as you can determine it. And the truth you uncover is hardly ever absolute, but is more often probabilistic or relativistic. “This is probably true” or “This is truer than that.”

Humanism is not a doctrine or a religion, but a philosophy. There is no anxiety of change, because humanists regard change as a part of discovery, and discovery is growth, and growth adds meaning to our lives.

Humanism regards truth as elusive, often surprising, sometimes diabolical.

For example, is it true that I exist? As the philosopher Rene Descartes said “I think, therefore I am” – because even asking the question is enough to prove I exist. So I see my existence as the most highly probable truth, about as close to certainty as I can get.

Am I speaking before a congregation or am I just a brain sitting in a lab jar creating all of this through my imagination? Are you all my imagination, a construct of my creative self, or are you real? That I am speaking before a number of “I s” that exist is a highly probable truth, but is relatively less certain than my existence.

### “HISTORY OF HUMANISM”

Now I don’t want to spend a great deal of time on an academic discussion of the history of Humanism because I want to focus on the relationship between Humanism and Unitarian Universalism, and there’s a lot I want to say about that.

The history of humanism is really the history of the thinking human brain and is generally regarded as beginning with the Neolithic Period, some 10,000 years ago when man (and by that time there was only one version of man who survived the evolutionary process – homo sapiens, us) began a stationary existence by taming his environment, growing crops, domesticating animals. This was a revolutionary period of cultural change when society, as we know it, was born, that is, large communities, consistent ritualistic practices, and perhaps even what we might call “religion”

But it is generally regarded that the early Greeks were the first to develop and formalize the reasoning process at the heart of humanism, the rejection of spiritual forces, and also the idea of critical inquiry. When last I spoke here, I described how the early Greeks, in the context of finding social justice, dispensed with the idea of a world ruled by the gods instead adopting an appreciation of the power of human beings to find truth through observation, inquiry, and reason. In Sophocles’ Antigone, are the words “wonders are many, yet of all things is man the most wonderful”

The ideas expounded by the Greek classicists, like so many things Greek, found their way into Roman culture and were preserved for a time. With the collapse of Greek culture, and then Rome, and the onset of what is referred to as the Dark Ages, much of the humanistic elements of the Greco-Roman culture were lost and replaced by Christian elements based on an authoritarian Byzantine or Roman hierarchy where independent thought could have serious consequences and where education was reserved solely for the clergy.

The humanistic Greek classics were preserved, in large part, by Islamists beginning in the 7<sup>th</sup> century who converted much of the works to Arabic and carried them back into Europe through the Moorish invasions. Ironically, this study of Greek humanistic thought was carried out over 1,000 years ago in that center of philosophic learning referred today as the City of Baghdad. So, in a very real way, we can thank the Islamic world for preserving humanistic thought.

Some time ago I read “How the Irish Saved Civilization” which claimed that much of that preservation was also carried out by the monks living in remote Ireland away from the conflict and religious bigotry in mainland Europe. The Christian Church that dominated Central and Eastern Europe above the Moorish areas selectively preserved only what was consistent with Christian teachings.

The rediscovery of these Greek Classics preserved by the Moors, and those that survived the Middle Ages, brought humanism back into European thought during the Renaissance but only in a manner consistent with Christian doctrine, hence the oxymoronic term religious humanism. Education outside of the monastery was rare, and science was viewed only as a reflection of God’s plan. You might have contracted a disease and the question put forth was not how you got it, but to what purpose did God afflict you.

During the Enlightenment (1680-1820), humanism flourished when advances in science were able to reveal the truths of nature that were heretofore God’s secrets. Many of the philosophers of the time, including Thomas Paine whom Carl Benner discussed a few weeks ago, rejected religious dogma in favor of the free-thinking that rejected religious authority. The enlightenment era philosophers, building upon the Greek classicists, generated the democratic principles which founded our country.

So even though this history is very simplified, we can still see the path of humanistic philosophy starting with the Greeks and continuing through our U.S. Constitution. Humanism, after having the door closed by religious bigotry and self-servingness, managed to somehow squeeze through the keyhole and come out on the other side.

### ARE HUMANISTS ATHEISTS?

Humanist thought is characterized by rational skepticism, the use of scientific or critical inquiry, logic and reason. It rejects authority, arbitrariness, divine revelation, reincarnation, non-material existence, devils, or the soul or anything that has yet to be proved. The only revelation is that which is revealed through rational thought.

But are humanists atheists? Not necessarily. I think it’s safe to say that you won’t find a humanist who accepts anything close to a personal god. I think a humanist would consider it the height of self-absorbance and egocentricity that the governor of Georgia would stand on the steps of the capital to pray for rain (as he did) that might otherwise not have come. He was personally asking the great creator of the unbounded universe, the creator of the infinite wonder of life and existence, to temporarily intercede and suspend the laws of atmospheric physics to drop a little water on the microscopic portion of the universe called Georgia, USA.

But, like Thomas Paine, you will find those who consider the beginning of the universe (at  $t=0$ ) and wonder what force it was that initiated time, matter and energy. If there was a big bang, who, or what, lit the fuse.

So what do humanists think about religious practices. I think they view them as a legitimate means to deal with life's challenges, way to find solutions through metaphorical or allegorical means in order to clarify ethical or moral principles, such as a storyteller might use. But more on that in a minute.

### HUMANISM AND UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM

As is probably apparent to us all, humanistic thought is essential to our fourth principle, the free and responsible search for truth. But how does humanism itself fit into the Unitarian Universalism as a religion. Yes, a religion. In preparation for this talk, I read Daniel Dennett's "Breaking the Spell" (I also read some of Erich Fromm and Margaret Atwood, looking for inspiration). Dennett's book an indictment of religion, but I did disagree with his definition of religion as being based in supernaturalism. I know there are those of you who think religion must involve supernaturalism, but I think not. So, I hope, does the Internal revenue Service, or we're in a heap of trouble.

Define Religion (derived from dictionary.com): a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs. It is a means to develop ethical and moral values and to determine the meaning of our existence.

That sounds pretty good to me.

### HUMANISM TO UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM

So how do we get from humanism to UUism, from a philosophy to a religion? I suggest it occurs by the addition of two elements to humanism.

Now I was always envious of people who had equations, laws, or theories named after them, Ohm's Law, Avogadro's Number, Archimedes Principle, etc. etc. So I'd like to propose the Grzywinski Equation, knowing it will have a shelf life of about five minutes from now after which it will fade into oblivion. It is a recipe, if you will, that defines how humanist thought relates to UUism as a religion.

:  $HU + I + S_L = UU$

HU is, of course, humanism.

I is Inclusiveness. It is the act of opening up our minds to consider, however briefly and skeptically, all viewpoints, philosophies, contrary understandings, judgments and beliefs. Some may be so absurd that we can immediately dismiss them (like creationism). Others may open up new roads of inquiry and may therefore enlighten us or enable us to find the logical flaws in our reasoning. This inclusiveness involves not only "tolerating" other belief systems or cultures but searching them out and embracing them as a possible source of learning.

(I've often thought the word "tolerance" when applied to religion or races was insulting. You "tolerate" an obnoxious neighbor, or an uncomfortable chair. But with respect to belief systems or cultures, I prefer to use "acceptance" or "appreciation". I'm still searching for the right word.)

I've often thought that this aspect was a particular failing of UUism. What we say we are is not always what we really are. Some time ago, I noted in a Board meeting that it seemed that our congregation was

becoming, or perhaps had always been, anti-Christian. We are more than willing to have a Hindu, Muslim, Wiccan, or Buddhist speaker (and we have had all), but we shudder at the thought of having a Roman Catholic priest, or Evangelical Christian minister. What is it we fear? I was both pleased and concerned in reading the last issue of UU world that others have recognized this same failing in other congregations. Perhaps we're on the road to discovering what the underlying problem is and how to correct it. I suggest it resides somewhere in a backlash to Christian dogmatic absolutism early in many of our lives.

As I have refined my own personal humanistic philosophy, I've become more accepting of other religions, even as I recover (literally) from the trauma of growing up a strict Roman Catholic. I've developed a close friendship with a Lutheran minister and while I know the humanistic side of me can never accept many of the religious tenets he accepts as a matter of faith, I've listened to him, attended and been inspired by his sermons, and have come to admire him greatly and appreciate the commonality of purpose between us. He, like us, wants to improve the human condition. He requires the tool of Lutheranism to achieve his goals. I require Unitarian Universalism. But we both end up in the very same place.

In that regard, I am really looking forward to Mike Cluff's upcoming presentation of Jewish and Christian teachings.

S<sub>L</sub> is Spirituality. When I gave my talk about a year ago entitled "Even Atheists Need Rituals", I defined spirituality (paraphrasing) as a feeling, a mental representation of the state of our body. It is not like joy or sadness, but a deeper sensation that affects us at a higher level than emotion. When we begin our service, there may be a sense of fulfillment, an expectation of goodness, something that tells us we're doing the right thing or making a right choice. Feeling is important for our sense of what is positive and whether we are achieving our purpose.

Spirituality is an important component of our UU faith and should be encouraged. Our individual members approach UUism differently – some principally from spirituality peppered with humanistic thought. Others, like me, start primarily from humanism but also cherish the spiritual component – rituals, music, compassion, meditation, love, etc.

Since my last talk, I've given spirituality much more thought. And I think Spirituality is "Love". Love of self, love of neighbor, love of community, love of life and existence. Maybe we can explore that further in the future.

## **CONCLUSION**

So, where do we end up?

1. Humanism is at the core of UUism and the basis for many of our principles. It is the empirical, objective and fully conscious portion of Unitarian Universalism.
2. Humanism itself is not sufficient for us to lead a full and rich life.
3. Inclusiveness is a necessary bridge to additional learning and spirituality.
4. Spirituality, or love, is the subconscious portion of UUism and provides an essential balance to humanism allowing compassion, patience and understanding to enter our lives. Spirituality is also essential to our psychological well being.

In closing, I remember when growing up Catholic being told I was given free will by God – meaning I could either accept the dogma of Catholicism and gain the rewards of heaven, or reject Catholicism and suffer the pains of hell. I considered these unsatisfactory alternatives. Untested truths supported by unquestioned faith were disturbing to me and unsatisfying to my intellect even as a very young man. I found myself wondering what was behind “Door #3”.

Late in life, I opened that door and found the joy of Unitarian Universalism.