

Atheism II- Humanism part of a sermon series
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Last week I began this series on atheism by trying to look at some of the nuances of this very rational approach to religion and morality. My first point was to distinguish the majority of atheists from the polemical fanatics who are garnering most of the headlines these days with their inflammatory rhetoric. They were the ones William Murry described in our reading when he noted how a “dynamic religious vision gradually became petrified for many into dogmatic rationalism.” (Murry, Wm.R, “Reason and Reverence” Skinner House, 2007 p xv)

On re-reading my sermon from last week, I was most struck by the comment of philosopher Anthony Simon Laden. His view is not shaped by unbelief per se. Instead, the idea of God is ‘irrelevant’ to him. He describes the “absence of God in my imaginative landscape”. Believers are hell bent to focus on this issue of unbelief and completely miss the point that atheism is a far richer realm of thought. It’s much, much more than the question of God-no God. It is about celebrating the human mind and our rational capabilities. It’s about seeing humans centered IN an interdependent universe, not as the center OF the universe. It is about searching out ways of defining and grounding morality and virtue in things other than divine myths and commandments. Rather than being the religion of the book, it is the philosophy of entire libraries of human experience and thought.

Of course atheism is not just one stream of thought. There is no formal doctrine or single set of teachings. In some ways that makes it an easy target. The people who are used to structured moral codes and sound byte theology focus on one or two things and demonize them. That was brought home this Thursday when I listened to a Charles Adler program on CHED. He had the Humanist Association of Canada President Pat O’Brien debating a believing English journalist over the atheist bus campaign, a new series of bus ads in the UK that read, “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.”

Adler, of course, likes to reduce things to absurd levels in order to cause controversy. To paraphrase his comments, humanists believe in nothing, just live to attack people who do believe in God, and are cold, rational machines who exist with no real moral code. In other words, all humanists are grouped around the polar extreme of God haters.

Of course that’s not true, and he knows it, but his God deals in ratings. Balanced views don’t sell...just look at the CBC ratings. To his credit, Adler did read one of my two e-mails to the program, the more benign one that noted how the humanist campaign was privately subscribed and that they raised ten times what they originally sought. Clearly people cared about this message.

And that leads to a theme for today’s sermon. Settling between the poles of belief and unbelief are a very large number of people who can be described as humanists. Once again, their focus is not on the question of belief or unbelief. And because that is not the driving concern of their philosophy, humanism becomes a rather large tent that is home to moderate believers and unbelievers alike.

Well, let’s look at humanism and see if we can get a handle on it. Allow me to illustrate with this somewhat lengthy definition from the Oxford English Reference

Dictionary (Second Edition, 1996)

Humanism n: an outlook or system of thought attaching prime importance to the human rather than divine or supernatural matters. The term humanism does not refer to a unified theory. Historically it was first applied to studies promoting human culture, and especially the cultural movement of the Renaissance, which turned away from Medieval scholasticism (with its theological bias) to value the human achievement of ancient Greece and Rome. In philosophy the term has encompassed systems of thought stressing rational enquiry and human experience over abstract theorizing or orthodox religion. More broadly, humanist beliefs stress the potential value and goodness of human beings, emphasize common human needs, and seek solely rational ways of solving human problems.

Clear now?

In university days, I tripped over humanism. I had learned something about the modern version through church courses. I'll get to a fuller description in a few moments, but I knew that modern humanism could reasonably be associated with atheism. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that Renaissance humanism was first formulated by devout believers like Erasmus. How could that be?

Over time I learned that early Humanism developed in the first universities as a way of bridging discoveries in science, history and the fast developing realm of art. I will not spend the next hour describing this rebirth, as much as I would like to do so. Suffice it to say that the rapidly developing growth of a mercantile class, and the huge expansion of European economies and private cash (as opposed to property) wealth weakened the church's hold over culture. There was a new optimism and more leisure for the upper classes. Human beings began to realize that they were capable of accomplishing amazing things in art and architecture, in reason and academics, in commerce, in science and technology. There was a renewed fascination with the philosophies of Greece and Rome, cultures which had a high regard for human abilities.

The early humanists did not turn away from God, but rather celebrated God's gift of human abilities. Free will and creativity allowed us to take the world and make it better and more beautiful, productive and profitable...all according to God's design, of course.

Two hundred years later, the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason would add an immense amount of fuel to this self-confidence and belief in our human abilities. It would also exacerbate the already existing tensions between church and science, between faith and reason. But by then the church had lost much of its secular power. It still took courage to name oneself as an atheist, but it was no longer an invitation to a death sentence.

Jumping ahead we come to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The 1870's through to about 1912 was marked by an incredible optimism. The faithful and the atheists alike were swept up in both an optimism that the world was perfectible and that we were on the path towards that goal, and in a new romantic appreciation of the natural world.

All of that would come crashing down with the horror of the Great War in 1914-18 and would be sealed with the Great Depression starting in 1929. In those few

short years that hope for perfection was dashed. The already active God is Dead movement gained traction. Believers began to wonder if anyone heard their prayers. The churches emptied in ways that would not be seen again until the 1970's. In our own tradition, the Universalist Church of America, once one of the largest in the U.S. was almost wiped out.

In these new, bleak and despairing times humanism was given a new expression in the Humanist Manifesto in 1933, a document signed by 34 religious leaders, many of them Unitarians and Universalists. Charles Francis Potter, minister of this church during World War I was one of the signatories. As Murry noted in the reading, it was designed to generate a new optimism based on a belief in our human ability to solve our own problems. If no divinity was going to rescue us from despair, we would have to figure it out for ourselves.

Although the drafters were careful to refrain from saying anything obvious like "There is no God," that was how it was widely read by atheists and believers alike. Phrases like, "Religious humanists regard the universe as self-existing and not created," certainly flew in the face of belief of a creator God. Later in the document they argue against any divine guarantees. While they allow that a divinity might exist, it will have to be proved by science before it can be believed.

But the true importance of the document was the assertion that humans can develop moral frameworks without the presence of the divine. To put another popular way, one doesn't need God to be good. We can fix this mess ourselves.

Interestingly, these humanists still saw value in religion...of course most were employed as ministers! "Religion consists of those actions, purposes, and experiences which are humanly significant. Nothing human is alien to the religious. It includes labor, art, science, philosophy, love, friendship, recreation — all that is in its degree expressive of intelligently satisfying human living. The distinction between the sacred and the secular can no longer be maintained."

There no doubt that Unitarian and Universalist participation in the drafting and promotion of the Humanist Manifesto and its 1973 update led directly to the shaping of our present day Principles. "Respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person" and "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning" and respect for the interdependent web emerge directly from the Manifesto. It was also key to the inclusion several of our Sources especially the acknowledgment that we draw from "Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against the idolatries of mind and spirit".

Last week I suggested in my conclusion that atheism needed to work on a more unified moral code, something that made it plain that the philosophy was about much more than simple disbelief in God and a positive belief in reason. It was that lack of an agreed upon code that gave Charles Adler his ammunition the other day on the radio. While the Humanist Association's Pat O'Brien had responses, they lacked brevity and coherence. He had nothing catchy to quickly capture his views. Sometimes humanists and atheists alike suffer from a need to express themselves fully and completely. That is not often tolerated on talk radio. Like it or not atheists and humanists need sound bytes if they are to make their case in today's media. The atheist bus ad slogans are good attempts.

Equally, there is a need to incorporate the full range of human experience.

While I have no wish to disrespect rational philosophy, it cannot describe all that it means to be human. In our reading I quoted from UU minister and educator William Murry's book. He describes himself as following 'humanistic religious naturalism'.

In one sense, this would seem no different from traditional religious humanism which rejects the supernatural and maintains there is only one reality, the natural universe. However, traditional humanism has historically been too anthropocentric; whereas for humanistic religious naturalism, nature, rather than humankind is ultimate... integrating religious humanism with religious naturalism results in a greater spiritual depth and a language of reverence, both of which many find missing in traditional religious humanism. (Murry, p. xvii-xviii)

A purely reasoned religion sometimes fails to feed the creative, mysterious and non-rational part of the human being. I say 'non-rational' not 'irrational'. It is an important distinction. The irrational opposes rationality. It is the choice to believe the unreasonable even in the face of good evidence. Non-rational is something else. It reflects an occasional decision to simply not apply reason to all cases or questions, or to give emotion pride of place in making some decisions. It is going with the flow. The mechanics of laughter can be explained by science and reason, but laughing is a spontaneous, emotional and usually non-rational activity. The same is true of anger and love and rooting for the Oilers.

If we limit our discussions of religion to the poles of rational versus irrational then we perpetuate the popular understanding of the old Greek dualism of mind and spirit. It is a convenient, but false dichotomy. The human being is 'both and'. We are capable of reason and emotion. We are able to be grounded and spiritual at the same time. In different degrees for different people we apply our complex abilities in order to make sense of the world around us. I hold one of my daughters in my arms and have a pretty good grasp of the biology that formed her body, and the mix of genetics, sociology and psychology that is shaping her emerging personality. And yet, I can still feel my heart shift and revel in the mystery and wonder that is the creation of this life that comes from me and her mother and which is uniquely her own. And I am sure that the most polemical atheist will recognize that feeling.

Both must be included in any comprehensive philosophical or theological outlook. The dualism divides us into camps that frequently war with each other, but each is a side of us worthy of respect. Those polarizing wars often leave the majority of people who live in the middle unserved.

I will suggest here that Murry's humanistic religious naturalism is one place where these diverse streams of our existence come together peacefully and cooperatively. This humanism is a way of exploring the world that does not require a divine being for justification or moral structure, but neither does it absolutely demand a disbelief in the entire concept of god. To be fair, Murry is an atheist, but I expect he would not mind this next inclusion. There is room for a sense of the divine in humanistic religious naturalism. It does, however, require the surrendering of the idea of an all knowing, all powerful, independent and judging god that is outside of creation, a god that is THE only creator whose absolute truth has been literally captured in any religious book. It does require an acceptance of Einstein's assertion paraphrased as God does not play dice with the universe.

In other words, the divine that some humanists choose to accept is a long way

from Jehovah and the Bible.

But let's be clear: humanism, especially religious humanism is not one thing, not one distinct mark on the line between belief and unbelief. It is rather a large share of the continuum between the two poles.

In the church dominated Renaissance, humanism began as a form of liberating Christian thought. It allowed a rediscovery of and celebration of human capability and creativity. In the 1930's it became the place where atheists asserted their grounded philosophy and expressed moral values in a time when God seemed dead and hope was hard to embrace. Both were reasoned responses to the times in which they lived. Today, in post-Christian North America, when people seek a new expression of meaning that brings together what they know and what they can only dream, humanism is available as a safe meeting ground for those who question rigid doctrines, but who still want to find meaning. It is a gathering place for those who are looking to describe the whole of human expression at once, the rational and the emotional, the intellectual and the spiritual, the factually grounded and the ecstatically creative.