

Our UU Theological Tapestry:
Religious Humanism in a Religious World

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Is the religious impulse inherent in our human species? And if so, is the belief in a Divine Source a required tenet of that religious impulse? What is it that we seek on a deeper level beyond the superficial and the mundane? Most people from other traditions who consider themselves to be religious, scoff at the idea that you can be humanist and religious without believing in God. For them, conjoining the two is the greatest oxymoron of them all. In fact, they not only find that idea to be absurd, they find it to be antithetical, heretical, and a mockery of true religion.

So, with that in mind, I dutifully scoured the internet searching for a common understanding of religion. Much to my surprise, I actually had a difficult time trying to find a universally accepted definition of what religion is supposed to be. Even the on-line Bible otherwise known as *Wikipedia* said it was hard to find one specific interpretation of the term.

Certainly, all the dead, white, European, male theologians, who consumed far too many of my weekends in college and graduate school, haunted me with their own complicated and convoluted descriptions, all of which included some form or another of a higher power. **However, I found the MacMillian Encyclopedia of Religions to have the most compelling definition to date.** They say that *religion is the organization of life around the depth dimensions of experience—varied in form, completeness, and clarity in accordance with the environing culture.* For me, that definition is the most exquisite and expansive thinking of them all, allowing for the religious impulse to take on many different forms of expression, not negating one perception from another. So, the question begs to be asked: Can one satisfy our human need for form,

clarity and completeness from the depth dimensions of experience without a transcendent omnipotent deity? With that in mind, the story I'm about to tell you tries to address that very question.

What would *you* do if someone swore that you knew the secret of life and put you on a stage to tell it? Author Alan Cohen, in his book *I Had It All the Time*, tells about an episode in the television program *The Totally Hidden Video* where the producers explored that very question.

For the gag, a Federal Express driver was asked to deliver a package to a religious temple (fabricated by the television show). Unknown to the driver, the pranksters had taken a photo of him and replicated it as a painted portrait, depicting the young man dressed in the royal regalia of the fictitious sect.

When the delivery man arrived, the disciples (actors hired by the program) took one look at him and began buzzing excitedly. They ushered him to the front of the sanctuary and had him sit on a plush cushion of honor. Then they revealed to him that he was the chosen one, the long-awaited prophet foretold in their scriptures. To allay any doubts, a servant parted the altar curtain where, lo and behold, hung the majestic portrait of the deliverer, "painted by a visionary centuries ago."

"Please," begged a disciple of the now incredibly perplexed FedEx man, "give us some words of wisdom."

The driver surveyed the portrait and looked over the throng of expectant devotees. A hush fell over the assembly. He sat down on the pillow, took a deep breath, and spoke: "Life," the FedEx sage explained, "is like a river."

The disciples "oohed" and "aahed" on the heels of his utterance, hanging fervently on every sacred word.

“Sometimes life flows easily, and sometimes you encounter rocks and rapids,” the guru illustrated, “but if you hang in there and have faith, you will arrive at the ocean of your dreams.”

Again, the students swooned with ecstasy. More “oohs” and “aahs.” This was indeed the day they had been waiting for!

“Well, that’s about it,” Swami FedEx curtly concluded, “I have to go now and make some more deliveries.”

Reluctantly the devotees rose, bowed reverently, and sheepishly cleared the way for the anointed one. Amid profuse veneration he made his way to the door.

Now here is the truly amazing postscript to the story: the program played the same trick on several FedEx drivers, each of whom found profound words the moment he sat on the cushion. The invitation to wax profound brought forth the inner wisdom in these unassuming fellows.

One can only conclude that deep within our heart, each of us knows some portion of life’s truths. The answers we seek, the power we strive for, and the acknowledgement we attempt to gain, abide inside us. Given the opportunity or the challenge, we know what we need to know, to do what we need to do.

This is essentially the basis for Humanism, that branch of Atheism that upholds the inherent worth and dignity of all people, while acknowledging that it is within the construct of our human existence that we will find the answers to life’s deepest questions. Rejecting the notion of any supernatural intervention or enlightenment, Humanism seeks to embrace an egalitarian society where our responsibility for one another and toward our planet is the vehicle for our knowledge and advancement.

By cultivating the human mind, Humanist morality evolves from an innate evolutionary sense of connection and purpose. Kindness,

compassion and thoughtfulness do not require the mandate of a theistic religion in order to exist. **Wisdom can be gained through experience.** *Altruism can be manifest through the sharing of material assets and intellectual gains.* For humanists, to become a good human being does not require the stricture of religious dogma or catechetical teachings. Humanism is very much about the individual journey in relationship to the whole. It is about the here and now, and it does not recognize an existence beyond the grave.

According to Wikipedia, Humanism, as it was conceived in the early 20th century rejected revealed knowledge, theism-based morality and anything of a transcendent nature. In the late 20th century the Humanist movement **that affirms the dignity and worth of all people** came into conflict with conservative Christian groups in the United States and "Secular Humanism" became the most popular element of organized Humanism. Practitioners of religious humanism did not officially organize under the name of "humanism" until the late 19th and early 20th centuries. [1]

Before the term "humanism" was ever coined or even thought of being integrated into religion, it had existed in America in at least an ideological sense for a very long time. Groups like the Free Religious Association (FRA) which was formed in 1867 and other less radical groups mainly consisting of extreme forms of early American Protestants such as the Unitarians and Quakers had existed from the very first landings of the Europeans in the Western Hemisphere. Unitarian Minister John H. Dietrich adopted the term "religious humanism" to describe his own religion.[2] He believed that there were elements of religious worship that could easily be applied toward Humanist beliefs, thus allowing for individuals to gather in community and reflect upon issues pertinent to human development and life stages. Dietrich is considered by some to be the "Father of Religious Humanism" (Olds 1996).

In 1929 Charles Francis Potter founded the First Humanist Society of New York whose advisory board included Julian Huxley, John Dewey, Albert Einstein and Thomas Mann. Potter was a minister from the Unitarian tradition and in 1930 he and his wife, Clara Cook Potter, published *Humanism: A New Religion*. Throughout the 1930s Potter was a well known advocate of women's rights, access to birth control, "civil divorce laws", and an end to capital punishment.[3]

In 1961, Webster's Third New International Unabridged Dictionary defined religious humanism as "A modern American movement composed chiefly of non-theistic humanists and humanist churches and dedicated to achieving the ethical goals of religion without beliefs and rites resting upon superstition." Indeed, a high percentage of members of Unitarian Universalist congregations today identify themselves as humanists.

So what is the difference between secular humanists and religious humanists, you might ask? Beyond the basic tenets of critical thinking and evidence over acceptance of dogma or a transcendent deity, religious humanists go a bit further and are not afraid to reclaim some of the language and rituals that have come to be associated with more traditional theistic belief systems.

Words like holy and sacred, spirit of life and great mystery spoken within rituals of reverence and gratitude encourage deeper reflection and conscious responses to the challenges of life. Religious humanism is less about what it does not believe and more about what it considers to be essential for this human journey that we share. It is *the organization of life around the depth dimensions of experience seeking form, clarity and completeness in communion with others*, **where wonder and awe, humility and reason, scientific exploration and ethical human relationships**, reverence for the earth that sustains us, beauty, truth, and justice for all are part and parcel of its praxis. The validity of such a

religious yearning and expression is no less worthy than that of any other professed faith system.

Deep within each of our hearts, each of us knows some portion of life's truths. The answers we seek, the power we strive for, and the acknowledgement we attempt to gain, abide inside us. Given the opportunity or the challenge, we know what we need to know, to do what we need to do. Yet, we cannot do any of it in isolation.

The very essence of our species requires that we must work together in order to grow together. We must be ever vigilant of what we choose to bring to the altar of our humanity. We must be more aware of how we walk in the world...what we take from it and what we give back to it. Today, as we recognize Religious Humanism as one of the threads in our UU Theological Tapestry of Faith, **we must also recognize that it is through the familiar rituals of worship that we lift-up the better nature of our humanity** along with its elements of weakness and brokenness and together we say **“Yes!”** to life and to the responsibilities that it engenders, and to the *hospitality that it requires*. We say **“Yes!”** to the truth that dwells within us all. We say **“Yes!”** to the fire of commitment that compels us to be the best human beings that we can be.

SO BE IT

[1], [2], [3] are from Wikipedia