



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“The Story Behind the Story”

© by the Reverend Don A. Randall

A sermon delivered on October 2, 2016

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

For man, when perfected, is the best of animals, but when separated from law and justice, he is the worst of all. Aristotle

Nothing is divine but what is agreeable to reason. Immanuel Kant

*To be fully human, one must be in dialogue with others: thinking, feeling, arguing.
Friedrich Schleiermacher*

*A humanistic religion if it excludes our relation to nature, is pale and thin,
as it is presumptuous, when it takes humanity as its object of worship. John Dewey*

*It is moral man who perceives reason and strives to know; the real world is humanity....
Self-consciousness arises in response to the words and gestures of others. H. Richard Niebuhr*

Sermon

The impetus for this sermon came this summer out of my realization that I had gaps in my theological education. Maybe you know what happens when you are in school: a lot is thrown at you all at once and you don't catch it all; or you missed that day; or you skimmed the chapter. Whatever the cause, something I was reading back in the summer made me realize I did know as much as I thought I did. I decided the best way to resolve this problem, was to reread Paul Tillich's, *A Complete History of Christian Thought*. Now I know everything—I just can't remember most of it!

During that summer reading, I had moments of reverie when my mind drifted back to being a student at Candler School of Theology at Emory. I had one memory of getting back a paper I had written for a systematic theology course. In the margin was a note from the professor giving me a compliment. The note said, “Don, you demonstrate the ability to write and think theologically.” I said to myself, Wow, I better reread this paper and make sure I can do it again. Well, that was a wakeup call for me. I discovered what I had written actually seemed to go in circles, with each argument depending on the preceding one and then, back again. But I kept at it. Later that semester we had a test to be written in class. Essay form. Time pressure! Knowing that I could write theologically, I got right to it. But this time I slipped up. I referred to Jesus' crucifixion

as the “crucifixion”! My professor good-naturedly wrote in the margin, “Freudian slip?” I should have known at that point I would never make it in the Christian ministry, but, alas, I did not know then that Unitarian Universalism existed.

However, how each person, including each of us, chooses to think about theology, or ultimate life questions, it is done in the context of his or her early meaning-making tradition. That tradition might be some form of Christianity, as in my case, or a form of Judaism, secular or religious humanism, transcendentalism, and in rare cases, Unitarian Universalism, and so on. What is crucial is that we will each either perpetuate or deviate from our tradition. This morning I would like to explore some of the deviations that contribute to Unitarian Universalism.

As most of you know, Unitarianism in this country grew out of increasingly liberal Congregational churches in New England, while Universalism had its roots in some liberal Baptist churches. However, the more basic question remains, what made these liberal deviations possible? Each generation of established churches thinks of itself as orthodox. Each generation of progressive churches thinks of itself as cutting edge, more advanced, and more worthy of membership.

To appreciate this reality, we need only look back to the 1839 Harvard Divinity School Address by Ralph Waldo Emerson, in which he blasted the Unitarians of his day for being too conservative, too traditional, and out of touch with modern biblical scholarship. He regaled them that biblical miracles should be understood as allegories and that the only miracle was mankind itself. Emerson scandalized his contemporary Unitarians by ridiculing their superstitions and calling them to a more open and radical religion. The irony is that this same group had just 19 years prior formed the American Unitarian Association and declared their formal break from Congregationalism in order to “diffuse the knowledge and promote the interests of pure Christianity”.

Emerson had learned a lot of his radicalism on a trip to Europe where he discovered that scholars were thinking of God as nature itself as opposed to a religion, or as God in people rather than in liturgy and he learned, if God were in people, then people were God. These ideas had been fermenting for some time in Europe in the form of Idealism and Romanticism. Each movement was a reaction to the orthodox beliefs of both the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant churches who also wanted to be orthodox. Once the bonds of right belief, correct ritual, and magic began to loosen, it was a logical step to explore the foundations upon which these radical deviations had been built.

I would like to now share with you some of the thinking that was fueling the movement toward modern religion, and at this point we might as well start calling it humanism.

Ironically, it was the Roman Catholic monasteries that had preserved much of the extant work of the Greek philosophers. Aristotle, in particular, had a strong humanist bias. The early church fathers had already incorporated a lot of the Greek thinking into the church’s theology, as it assimilated the philosophy of the Greek and Roman world. The letters of St. Paul also contributed greatly as he wrote to the newly forming Christian groups around the Mediterranean. We can see the Roman Church struggled diligently to incorporate Christ’s humanity into his divinity to appeal to the Greek consciousness. If then, Jesus was both God and man, and the trinity was indivisible, logic says that there is no difference between God and man. These issues are fine points of theology, and I’m sure they have for years warranted notes in the margin of many a seminary student.

Fortunately for the Roman church, Protestantism came along and gave it an external foe. But that is the story of the Reformation, and I want to focus on a bigger picture. The bigger picture is that out of all of the turmoil of spiritual and intellectual rebellion there was a gradual awareness that people could think for themselves. One size did not fit all! Of course there had always been individuals who thought for themselves, but as people of all levels of society began to read, not only the bible, but also tracts of various opinions, they discovered they had opinions, too. Among Christian theologians, most made an effort to synthesize the emerging humanism with orthodoxy.

But, questions about God became more linked to the questioner than to answers found in scripture or the dogma given by a particular church. Therefore, the answers were varied. To be sure, the church, whether it was Catholic or Protestant, was invested in keeping its particular status quo. But once religious authority was openly questioned on a broad scale, authority would never be the same. In essence, religious questions came less from above and more from below. Something theologically analogous to the theory of trickle-down economics had been exercised by the church, and we know how well that works.

As the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries rolled around, a number of great philosopher/theologians began wrestling with finding God among all the relativity. Some of them tried to defend orthodoxy (top down) and some tried new ways of the developing humanism (bottom up). If the authority of dogma or scripture were removed, how could God or his will be known? Could one know God by using the mind? Could one know God by feeling him? Could one know God by having a mystical experience? All of these avenues seemed valid but unreliable; each was too idiosyncratic to the individual. Many attempts were made to know God or prove his existence by logic. Did you ever try to read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*? A great cure for insomnia! Or how about trying Schleiermacher's work on religious feeling? More likely many of us have read William James' book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. The point of all of their labors is that for those unwilling to accept the authority of scripture or church dogma, or both, they were left with their own experience and reason for the authentic answers.

Many visionaries have set examples for us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who was martyred by the Nazis, paradoxically wrote that, "God is teaching us that we must live as men who can get along very well without him." Adolf Von Harnack was of the opinion that the gospel of Jesus Christ had very little in common with the doctrinal authority of the church. Walter Rauschenbush, was the leading figure in the social gospel movement. Rauschenbush was a very pious man who realized that to follow Jesus did not mean believing certain things but rather acting in ways that Jesus taught. As a result, in the early 1900s, Rauschenbush took a look around his New York City parish and saw the poverty and the suffering, and he realized real Christianity would do something about it. So he did and started the movement known as the social gospel. This focus away from church dogma to church service has become pervasive. That is why when you go out to attack a social or human rights issue, you are rubbing shoulders with an Episcopalian, a United Methodist, a Baptist, a Catholic, a Disciples of Christ, a United Church of Christ, a Jew, a Muslim, or a Lutheran, among others. In spite of our differences, they are often our friends in ministry!

That I mentioned Catholicism should not surprise anyone. Even though the Roman Catholic Church is the ultimate of top down authority, it is also the church of Mother Teresa. Vatican II went a long way to confirm the humanism of the church. The church fathers stated "nothing genuinely human fails to echo [in the followers of Christ]". And, there is a "surprisingly

human character of the mission of the church.” Pope Paul VI in his Easter encyclical of 1967, referred to a “transcendent humanism,” a “new” and complete humanism” that is a “true and “universal humanism.” Recently Pope Frances has gone even further with his outreach to gays and lesbians.

So what is the bigger challenge to Unitarian Universalism? One day I was playing golf with a former rector of St. Gregory’s Episcopal Church. The Episcopalians had just elected their first gay bishop, and my golf partner was chided me that we UUs needed to get a move on or the Episcopalians were going to catch us. In a way, being caught would be a good thing, as long as we are not standing still. There will always be a new injustice, a new environmental challenge, or a new challenge to the open search for truth. I understand that the US Coast Guard has two powerful ice breakers. They go ahead of other ships breaking up otherwise impassable ice and making it possible for needed material and rescue missions to move forward. UUs, unfettered by dogma, unbound to any scripture and committed to supporting one another’s journeys in search of truth should always be breaking the ice of human need and injustice.

One of the casualties of the loss of top down authority is that humanism loses the check and balance of a higher power. If I look to myself for what is right or moral, it is just me. But that has always been the case as whoever had authority to interpret God’s word was only human. When I asked an atheist member of AA what he did for a higher power, he immediately said “it’s the group”. So we too are left with the crucial need to go about the search and the decision making as a group rather than alone. The group supports and challenges one another.

Amen

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. Do you view yourself as a humanist? If so, why?
2. Do you think humankind created God. Or the idea of God.
3. Is the term God useful to you?