

Editor's Introduction.

From one perspective, these two articles by Ann Fox and Arthur Falk have little in common. One is short and exuberant, a hymn of praise to UU humanism from a fellow UU; the other a lengthier treatise than we usually publish, from a non-UU on a far more scholarly subject, replete with annotations and references. I've placed them together because they are, to me, asymmetrical 40th anniversary bookends for the wide conversation this publication promotes: the ongoing interchange between humanist and other views with UUism, and the interaction between religious humanists and those of a more secular bent. I encourage you to read them together, and imagine them in context: Ann's sermon to a congregation, many of whom know little of humanism, and Arthur's talk to an audience of secular humanists, who incidentally, know only a little of UUism.

The Courageous HUUMANISTS

by Rev. Ann C. Fox

I was shocked and dismayed when I turned on the TV a bit too early for the 11 p.m. news and accidentally tuned in to one of the horrendously *bad* reality TV shows. The scene was a mother talking to her son. She spoke to him of "The Lord." He laughed derisively and said, "The Lord? There is no Lord! It just doesn't exist!" She went on to say that she felt the presence ... the son smirked; the mother ended up crying and leaving the room. This teen-ager was clearly not raised a Unitarian Universalist! *Our* youth are taught to live out our *principles* and especially our Third Principle: Acceptance of one another... If we do not cultivate acceptance of one another's beliefs, we could not possibly survive as a religion that encourages each of us to decide for ourselves what is true about our relationship to the universe, and to *rest assured* that what we each believe to be true religiously is *valid*. Clearly this teen-ager is a secular humanist, and a rude and arrogant one at that. *Our* UU HUUMANISTS could not *possibly* be so uncivilized, could they?

Most UU humanists are *religious* humanists, which means that they are open to a sense of wonder about the universe, awe at the beauty of music, art, and literature, and perhaps the galaxies, but yet also believe that there is a *rational* explanation for all things. They look to the power of *reason* for inspiration. They usually believe that the world is self-created and sustaining, and all phenomena can be rationally explained through the scientific method, even though science cannot explain all things at this time in our human development. They usually do *not* believe in a supernatural being that intercedes in history. But then, many if not *most* UUs with a belief in a divine source also do not believe in divine intervention in history either.

Scripture and divine revelation will generally mean little to a humanist. But UUs generally believe that revelation is *not* sealed and certainly not restricted to the scripture of world religions. Humanists usually do not believe in heaven or hell or in any kind of afterlife. (And many UUs who believe in a divine source also do not believe in an afterlife, but there are those who do.) Humanists who have a sense of *awe* call themselves *religious humanists*, and if they feel *great inspiration* from that awe, they may call themselves *mystical humanists*. Is the term itself—"religious humanist"—a *contradiction* in terms, since "humanist" implies that *human beings* are the center of the

universe and “religious” implies that God is the center? One answer is that religious humanists generally see human beings *in community* as the organizing principle of religion.

How did humanism come to be a part of Unitarian Universalism? It was the *courage* of nineteenth century Unitarians that opened the doors. The courage to allow people to say what they *really believed to be true*. It was not an easy path for them, or for those who wanted to *hold back* the forces of change, the forces that almost split forever the Unitarians into humanist and theist camps. That would have very likely been the end of Unitarianism if it were not for highly skilled negotiators in our ranks. They could never have imagined there would be this *many* different theological perspectives more than 150 years later!

We have two streams of thought to thank for humanism: the first is that of the New England Transcendentalists led by a Unitarian minister, Ralph Waldo Emerson in the 1830s. This movement was inspired by German idealist philosophy, and caused a great struggle in Unitarianism, which was then “Channing Christianity”—a liberal belief in Jesus as a special incarnation of the divine, but a belief that was beginning to question miracles, the virgin birth and the resurrection. Within Unitarianism, the New England Transcendentalists expanded our religious ideas to include art, literature, music, beauty, nature, world religions, and above all, individual *intuition* and *personal experience* as the basis of religion.

At the Harvard Divinity School address in 1838, Emerson caused an *uproar* amongst the faculty when he urged worship of the *teachings* of Jesus, not the *person* and that students should look to their own intuition to guide their religious life. Most of the faculty *reviled* him; the students *adored* him. Unitarian individuals and ministers were drawn to Transcendentalism but the times were not yet ripe for such radical ideas. Only one minister, the Reverend Theodore Parker carried the Transcendentalist ideas successfully in his Unitarian ministry and he suffered ostracism by many of his colleagues.

The second stream of thought was inspired just two decades later in the mid-west by Darwin’s theory of evolution. Scientific discoveries were influencing the intellectuals in Unitarianism in the 1800s. In 1859, Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, documented in his book *Origin of Species*, gave great impetus to an already blossoming turn towards “Free Religion” that sought embrace of all of Protestantism and would turn its attention towards serving humankind through social justice rather than focusing on doctrine or creed. After all, this was the *example* of Jesus’ life. It must have been an *exciting* time for free thinkers and a *distressing* time for those in Unitarianism who just wanted to have their worship services a *bit* more liberal than in the past but not *too radical*, please!

These two streams of thought, Transcendentalism and Free Religion, are the roots of the UU humanist movement of today. It did take a lot of courage for those early HUUmans to speak their minds on what they believed to be true; they certainly risked the discomfort of being in opposition to people in their congregation whom they loved and respected. No doubt some had to leave their religious homes. However, they did live in an age when all they lost was their religious friends, not their *lives*.

When the Dutchman Desiderius Erasmus lived in the 1500s on the brink of the Reformation and still some decades away from the Enlightenment, he risked his *life* by expressing *doubt* in such things as the necessity for priests to be celibate, and he expressed *confidence* in humankind being able to live a moral life without *prayers* and

the religious life. Whenever he got close to being called heretic, the timid Erasmus would *retreat* into fuzzy philosophical argument to confound his critics. It wasn't so much that he was a coward (though some in history have said that) but that he valued *peace*, and he was extremely reluctant to cause *controversy*.

There were also Universalist individuals and ministers who held humanist views and they were barely *tolerated*. Many jumped ship to the Unitarian camp. And some Unitarians went to the Universalist camp to *escape* humanism. Universalism's radical stream was more oriented towards expanding the use of the term "universalism" from meaning that all human beings are saved to a universal religion embracing the entire world. When the Unitarians and Universalists merged in 1961, the Universalist humanists were very glad indeed, but the believers in God amongst them were greatly concerned that there would be no place for them in the new *merged* religion. Little did they know that making a place for all beliefs was the greatest challenge to the combined Unitarians and Universalist of the twentieth century, which we did very well in the *final* decades of the last century.

Margaret King (writing in this publication in its 30th anniversary issue) said, "Religious humanism offers an attractive package of beliefs to Americans in the search for truth and meaning. It provides a ready-made fit with what most Americans have long accepted to be social, intellectual, and spiritual truths. These include the *fusing* of faith with reason, reliance on an *individual code of conscience* rather than a *group creed* for the search for truth; and the application of democratic practice within religion."

1. Humanists are more interested in engaging beliefs and values that will herald in a more just world for *all* people, and this is why *many* if not *most* Unitarian Universalists identify at least somewhat with humanism. However, many in this congregation identify with *humanism* and yet also hold open the door for a source of *divinity* in the universe.

2. There is *room in UUism* for people of all beliefs and we, *unlike* the teen-ager I described earlier, are *accepting* and *respectful* of our differences. I wanted us to see and feel that it is not necessary to be tied into a particular religious view, whether humanist, theist, Christian, or Pagan or other. Unitarian Universalist humanists—we say **H-U-U**-manists—may have a preference for *reason* to govern their thoughts about religion, but I guarantee you that they will have *love* at the core of their beliefs, otherwise they would not be here today or at any time. It is *love* that is the common factor in all our UU beliefs.

3. I believe that people have the beliefs they do because of their "inner structure"; that is, who they are as a person in their inner being. We are drawn to the religion that expresses that inner structure. For example, none of you could go to a fundamentalist church! It is simply not reflective of who you are or what you believe deep down. Now, perhaps you know a couple where one person is a humanist, perhaps an atheist, who has no time whatsoever for churches. The other is a very spiritual person whose natural inclination is to go to church. Let me say this: the person who has no time for spirituality is *not deficient!* The person who is deeply spiritual is *not deficient!* They are both simply differently structured. They both have to understand that about one another. And they both have to listen deeply to each other so they can stand in the other person's shoes. Then, they will have to let one another be the person they are and respect that.

Notes

Reference: David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*, Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1985.

1. Margaret King, "Religious Humanism: A Preliminary Cultural Study," in *Religious Humanism*, Vol XXXI #s 1&2 , Amherst, New York, Friends of Religious Humanism, Winter/spring 1997.