

Humanism and Religion ... or How to Thread a Needle

by Marilyn Westfall

... threading a needle serves as a metaphor for deciding what's best to say, or not to say, about religion. As a humanist, I do not want to defend in any way the superstitions promoted by religion; nor would I defend religion's violations against human rights and dignity. But yet, I want to understand why people are religious, and to assure that each person has the right to practice the religion of his/her choice. I want to be able to criticize religion, when it is necessary—but I want to give religious people an opportunity to moderate their most extreme and hurtful positions.

For centuries, the idea of God has been the very heart of religion; it has been said, no god, no religion — but humanism thinks of religion as something very different, and far deeper than any belief in god. To it, religion is not the attempt to establish right relations with a supernatural being, but rather the up-reaching and aspiring impulse in a human life. It is life striving for its completest fulfillment, and anything which contributes to this fulfillment is religious, whether it be associated with the idea of god, or not. — Rev. John Dietrich, a founder of Unitarian Religious Humanism.¹

*Religion spoke its last intelligible or noble or inspiring words a long time ago: either that or it mutated into an admirable but nebulous humanism, as did, say, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a brave Lutheran pastor hanged by the Nazis for his refusal to collude with them. We shall have no more prophets or sages from the ancient quarter, which is why the devotions of today are only the echoing repetitions of yesterday, sometimes ratcheted up to screaming point so as to ward off the terrible emptiness. — Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*²*

The first words I quoted were by a founder of Unitarian Religious Humanism, the Rev. John Dietrich, enormously popular as a speaker and writer in the 1920s – 1930s. Dietrich drew so many people to his sermons in Minneapolis, Minnesota that his congregation rented a theater, as the audience outgrew the church facilities. He never hesitated to state that the “completest fulfillment” of human aspiration was “religious” in nature. It is important to note, however, that his was a religion without God. The second quotation, on the other hand, is by the popular writer and debater Christopher Hitchens; his most famous (or infamous) statement may be that “religion poisons everything.”

Where can we find a middle ground between these two positions? Is it at all possible? Allow me to introduce two other voices. I'm a fan of singer-songwriters, and recall the song “*Jesus of Rio*,” recorded by David Crosby and Graham Nash, which concerns religion and the country of Brazil. A very human Jesus is mentioned in the song, reaching

out with holy palms to wipe tears away, perhaps tears of the poor and disenfranchised. There are deep divisions in Brazil between the haves and have-nots (more so than in the United States). High above both social classes stands a 130 foot statue of Jesus, built on a mountain peak over Rio de Janeiro. The statue is supposedly a symbol of “love in the land,” but according to the lyrics of Nash’s song:

If everyone opened their eyes
They’d see that loving feeling
Is waiting within us,
And if everyone opened their hearts
They’d see that every human
Is holy to someone.³

These lyrics, so resonant and humanistic, make me wonder, yet again, if religion is necessary for us to recognize another human’s worth. Do we need religion to remind us to love others? Or to point out that everyone deserves a fair shake in life?

At one time, when I first became a Unitarian Universalist in 1994, I would comfortably have called myself a religious humanist—pretty much agreeing with John Dietrich that the highest human aspirations might be described as religious impulses. These days, given the dire effects of religious fundamentalism, I question if humanity’s highest aspirations should have any ties to religion at all.

Just consider Mitt Romney’s recent comments that only religious people in the United States can aspire to or understand freedom: “Freedom,” Romney said, “requires religion just as religion requires freedom. Freedom opens the windows of the soul so that man can discover his most profound beliefs and commune with God. Freedom and religion endure together, or perish alone.”⁴ Romney’s statement disregards between 21 - 30 million nontheistic American citizens.

Or consider the plight of a nineteen-year old female victim of gang-rape in Saudi Arabia, who was sentenced to being lashed 200 times for *her* supposed transgression against Sharia law. Given these incidents and a long list of other recent events (proselytizing in the U.S. military to create a Christian army, promotion of Intelligent Design as Science, death threats made against cartoonists who depicted the prophet Mohammed, rape and murder in Darfur), religion can be justifiably viewed as an obscene anachronism. The Nobel Prize winning American physicist Steven Weinberg famously said: “With or without religion, you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion.”⁵

And yet, and yet... when I ponder Christopher Hitchens’ statement, made with such assurance, that religion “spoke its last intelligible or noble or inspiring words a long time ago,”⁶ again I take pause. Is what Hitchens claims really true? The philosopher and scientist Dan Dennett, who—like Hitchens—is considered one of the “New Atheists,” seems to disagree with Hitchens’ claim that “religion poisons everything.” In fact, in his book *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, Dennett says in stark contrast to Hitchens:

Some see religion as the best hope for peace, a lifeboat that we dare not rock lest

we overturn it and all of us perish, and others see religious self-identification as the main source of conflict and violence in the world... Good intentions pave both paths.

Who is right? I don't know. Neither do the billions of people with their passionate religious convictions. Neither do those atheists who are sure the world would be a much better place if religion went extinct.⁷

As a humanist, a freethinker, and a Unitarian Universalist, I find myself torn: wanting to at last dispense with religion and yet wanting to see religion redefined, refined, and made into a proper channel for human aspirations. I feel that I'm always threading the needle between these two positions. For those of you who don't sew, and who have excellent eyesight and hand/eye coordination, let me say that it's not a gimme to thread a needle—especially when you're past 40. There are many delicate and hairy splits in the typical length of thread, which have to be combed and caressed between thumb and finger, and stiffened to penetrate that thin needle slot. It can be a frustrating process, and yet it has to be done to mend or create a garment.

To me, threading a needle serves as a metaphor for deciding what's best to say, or not to say, about religion. As a humanist, I do not want to defend in any way the superstitions promoted by religion; nor would I defend religion's violations against human rights and dignity. But yet, I want to understand why people are religious, and to assure that each person has the right to practice the religion of his/her choice. I want to be able to criticize religion, when it is necessary—but I want to give religious people an opportunity to moderate their most extreme and hurtful positions.

I think my attempt to “thread the needle” regarding religion is an outgrowth of my Humanism. I have read all three versions of the “*Humanist Manifesto*,” and find merit in each. The first was written in 1933, and many of the original signatories were Unitarian Religious Humanists, including John Dietrich, mentioned at the beginning of this essay. The third rewrite of the *Manifesto* (published in 2003) is certainly an expression of the values by which I wish the world could live; however, I do recognize that my utopia is likely someone else's dystopia. For example, here is the initial paragraph of *Manifesto III*:

Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without superstition, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity.⁸

Such a simple, elegant statement; who could argue with it—right? Well, let me tell you what happened when an entire congregation read an affirmation about Humanism, using the *Manifesto*'s language, just this past summer, when I was invited to speak about the history of Humanism and Unitarianism at a UU church. During my visit, I was lucky enough to stay at the home of a dear friend whom I've known since we were both teenagers. She is more spiritual and religious than I am. She attended the service at which I spoke and, like everyone else, recited the affirmation for Humanism. However, she later told me that she almost refused to recite it. Why? Because Humanism outright rejected superstition and supernaturalism. She did not take kindly to this.

Maybe two hours after the Sunday service, we were driving back to her home, from lunch, and she said in raw anger: “You Humanists are trying to take all the magic from the world.” I was dumbfounded, and didn’t reply. Later in the day, after cooling down, she reminded me that she had been a social worker for over twenty years. “I saw so many horrible things during that time,” she said, “that I want to believe there’s some good in the universe—that something spiritual can help people along, and give them hope.”

Her words recalled for me what Rev. Martin Luther King once suggested—that there was an “arc of justice” designed into the destiny of humans: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” As a humanist, I would be reluctant to discard King’s strand of poetry, which is powerful and able to create the fabric of hope for humans.

But let me return to the current *Humanist Manifesto*. Does it really rob humans of “magic”? Hardly. Rather, it says that wonder, imagination, fulfillment, creativity, and meaning are available to everyone—religious or not. These emotional states are part of our human birthright, as stated in another paragraph of *Manifesto III*:

We aim for our fullest possible development and animate our lives with a deep sense of purpose, finding wonder and awe in the joys and beauties of human existence, in challenges and tragedies, and even in the inevitability and finality of death. Humanists rely on the rich heritage of human culture and the lifestance of Humanism to provide comfort in times of want and encouragement in times of plenty.⁹

Our human heritage—our very nature—allows us to experience awe, wonder, and flights of imagination. Also, we naturally give each other comfort. We naturally revel in “sublime” experiences; we’re born to do so.

There has been outreach by many humanists—famous and well-deserving of their fame—to repair the social fabric that has been damaged by open “cultural warfare”: ideological, political, and religious. For example, E.O. Wilson, who was honored as Humanist of the Year in 1999, wrote his new book *The Creation* as “an impassioned letter to a Southern Baptist pastor.” Wilson hoped to demonstrate “that science and religion need not be warring antagonists.” In fact, according to Wilson, religionists and nontheists need to stop antagonizing each other, because there is an enormous problem to mend—that of vanishing global biodiversity. So in *The Creation* Wilson asks his Evangelical counterpart to help him save plants, animals, and humans:

Let us see, then [Wilson addresses the Baptist minister], if we can, and you are willing to meet on the near side of metaphysics in order to deal with the real word we share. [...] I suggest that we set aside our differences in order to save the Creation. The defense of living Nature is a universal value. It doesn’t arise from, nor does it promote any religious or ideological dogma. [...] Scientists estimate that if habitat conversion and other destructive human activities continue at their present rate, half the species of plants and animals on Earth could be gone or at least fated for early extinction by the end of the century.¹⁰

Wilson’s outreach to his religious counterpart offers me hope, and a vision for an “arc of justice” for the other creatures on this planet; let us humans, no matter our religious

positions, agree to stop poisoning and destroying animal habitats.

On the other hand, while we're discussing reconciliation, we cannot ignore those who would prefer to "swiftboat" such a process. For example, did you hear of Islamo-Fascism Awareness Week? This was an event that occurred on perhaps a hundred college campuses during October 22-26, 2007, sponsored by David Horowitz and other sympathizers of the Neoconservative movement. Here is how the event was described on the web page constructed to advertise the event's dates and mission:

The purpose of this protest is crucial: to confront the two Big Lies of the political left: that George Bush created the war on terror and that Global Warming is a greater danger to Americans than the terrorist threat. [...] In the face of the greatest danger Americans have ever confronted, the academic left has mobilized to create sympathy for the enemy and to fight anyone who rallies Americans to defend themselves.¹¹

At bottom, this so-called "awareness week" is an attack on academic freedom, and thus is also an assault on the ability to discuss political ideology, activity, and the effects of political decisions on the American public and the world at large. The event included the distribution of literature such as: *The Islamic Mein Kampf*, *Why Israel is the Victim*, and *Jimmy Carter's War Against the Jews*.

Now, there is no doubt that the West is having difficulty responding to the growing influence of Islam and some of its pathologies. But is it then fair to give yet another forum to people like Ann Coulter, who was one of the headliners for this event, to bash Muslims in general? Wasn't it Coulter who said that we need to invade Muslim countries and convert all Muslims to Christianity?

I am proud to say that the American Humanist Association has been working to thread the needle in understanding and responding to Islam. Former diplomat Carl Coon, of the AHA's executive board, and several of the top staff, created a statement that was approved by the entire board, setting a standard for the organization's approach to Islam. Here is a portion of it:

Since September 11, 2001, prejudice and discrimination have been on the rise in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere against Muslims, especially those of Middle Eastern and similar descent. Such individuals are suffering from increased security screenings, hostile media attention, and oppressive new laws, as well as localized acts of violence and widespread disrespect. Moreover, disinformation campaigns and negative imagery have led to popular confusion wherein al-Qaeda is inaccurately connected to the former regime of Saddam Hussein, Iranians and South Asians are misidentified as Arabs, Sikhs are mistaken for Muslims, and the world faith of Islam, with its 1.3 billion followers, is viewed as a doctrinaire monolith.

The American Humanist Association is opposed to both the activities of Islamic extremists and to the "crusade" mentality rising in Western circles that condemns all Muslims indiscriminately. This statement aims at defining a rational and

informed humanist position. [...]

Humanists strive for a world where violence and fear are not the drivers of ideals and actions. In every case and in all its forms, extremism must be condemned. But neither should fear and ignorance be permitted to sanction prejudice and discrimination. Humanists recognize that challenging Islamic extremists, Christian fundamentalists, and all others who hold to religious or ideological extremes is not a process with an easy or short-term conclusion, but it is the way toward progress.

Humanists see no contradiction, on the one hand, between their longstanding adherence to principles that run contrary to religious beliefs and, on the other, their strong distaste for efforts to propagate a crusade mentality against Islam or any other religion. Religious liberty means freedom for all: freedom to peacefully affirm and practice a faith, freedom from religious coercion, and freedom to peacefully reject a faith. Such religious liberty is and always has been a central tenet of humanism and is herewith reaffirmed.¹²

This statement underscores the humanist values necessary to establish peace and tolerance. In an era when radical religionists and ideologues of fascism hold sway, we humanists must continue to appeal to reason, fairness, liberty, and to the scientific method to better understand humanity and preserve the planet. Like Dan Dennett, we can promote the rigorous multidisciplinary study of religion: “Those who are religious,” Dennett says, “and believe religion to be the best hope of humankind cannot reasonably expect those of us who are skeptical to refrain from expressing our doubts if they themselves are unwilling to put their convictions under the microscope.”¹³

Like E.O. Wilson, we can reach out in true diplomatic fashion to promote joint activism among religious and non-religious people, aimed at enormous problems, like ecological damage, which must be resolved. We must be vigilant that religious people are not denied rights under the Constitution; however, we humanists have a Constitutional right to argue against blind dogmatism and to hold ministers, priests, imams and other religious representatives accountable. In this way, we can “thread the needle,” creating a hopeful, progressive Humanism and more just vision for our country and the world.

Notes

1. John H. Dietrich, in Lloyd and Mary Morain, *Humanism as the Next Step*, Revised Edition, Amherst, New York, Humanist Press, 1998, Chapter 1, available on-line at: <http://www.americanhumanist.org/publications/morain/> .
2. Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great. How Religion Poisons Everything*, New York, Hachette Book Group, 2007, p. 7.
3. Graham Nash and Jeff Pevar, “Grace/Jesus of Rio,” from *Highlights*, Nash Notes, BMI/SONY ATV, Peeved Music BMI, 2006, track 10.
4. Mitt Romney, “Faith in America,” delivered December 6, 2007 at the George Bush Presidential Library, College Station, Texas, available on-line at NPR Transcripts:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16969460>

5. Quoted in “Crossing Flaming Swords Over God and Physics,” Carey Goldberg, *The New York Times*, April 20, 1999, available on-line at:

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?sec=technology&res=9B07E2DB1F3BF933A15757C0A96F958260&fta=y>

6. Hitchens, p. 7.

7. Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, New York, Penguin Books, 2006, p. 16.

8. *Humanism and Its Aspirations: Humanist Manifesto III, a Successor to the Humanist Manifesto of 1933*, The American Humanist Association, 2003, available on-line at:

<http://www.americanhumanist.org/3/HumandItsAspirations.php>

9. Ibid.

10. E. O. Wilson, *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*, New York, W. W. Norton & Co., 2006, p. 4.

11. “A Student’s Guide to Hosting Islamo-Fascism Awareness Week,” available on-line at: <http://media1.terrorismawareness.org/files/Islamo-Fascism-Awareness-Week-Guide.pdf>

12. “A Sensible Approach to Islam: A Statement by The American Humanist Association,” *The Humanist*, January/February 2008, p. 20-23 (sidebar).

13. Dennett, 17.