

## **"Alike & Different: Ethical Humanism and Unitarian Universalism."**

I want to talk this morning about Ethical Humanism and the Unitarian Universalists.

Many of you know that I spent most of my working life serving Unitarian Universalist congregations. Questions about this have come up during the time that I have been here, so it seems like a good time to explore this a bit. Why don't we start with a few questions:

How many people here are familiar with Unitarian Universalism?

How many of you have been to a Unitarian Universalist service?

How many of you checked out the Unitarian Universalists before you decided on Ethical Humanism?

How many of you have never heard of the Unitarian Universalists?

And, and this is an important question: For how many of you here is the Shelter Rock Congregation in Manhasset the only Unitarian Universalist congregation you've ever encountered?

Okay, let's get that off the plate first thing. Shelter Rock is an anomaly, there is no other Unitarian Universalist congregation like it. In fact, there are probably no other congregations anywhere quite like Shelter Rock. The Shelter Rock congregation

inherited the right to income from oil wells in the 1950s, and they now have sufficient resources to allow them to give away about 14 million dollars a year through the Veatch Foundation. They do a lot of good things with that money, but they are not in no way representative of Unitarian Universalism.

The Universalists and the Unitarians joined themselves into an association in 1961, not that long ago. Both groups were known earlier as Liberal Christians, though by the time of the merger they were both generally humanistically oriented.

But their history is Christian, both date back more than 200 years in this country. Each represented a theological viewpoint that dates to earliest years of Christianity and even before that.

Universalist thought began circulating in the American colonies just at the time of the revolution, the 1770s. The predominant theology of that era was predestination and the doctrine of the elect, also known as Calvinism (not, of course, this Calvin). But, here's what that means: If God is all powerful, it was thought, and not bound by time as we are, then it follows that God must know who would go to heaven and who would go to hell. If God does not know this, then God is not all powerful and perfect.

Which, when you put it that way, it kind of stands to reason.

So, therefore, if God knows all, God must have a list of who is going to go to heaven, the elect, and who is not. The unlucky.

The Universalist found this to be a pernicious doctrine. They looked at the scriptures, particularly the teachings of Jesus, which describe God as loving, as pure love! And they deduced from that that no loving God would create a human being just to damn them to hell for all eternity! Souls, the Universalists proclaimed were universally reunited with God in heaven; thus, Universalism.

The Universalists were roundly denounced for this; then, as now, there were a lot of preachers who delighted in passing judgement, denouncing sinners and preaching hatred.

But at the core of this theological disagreement rests differing views on the essential nature of humankind, on what our nature is. Some, many, believe that we are essentially evil, kept in line only by the threat of eternal damnation. The Universalist believe that we are essentially created good and that God is big enough to accept our unfortunate lapses.

So, despite considerable resistance from other religious groups, the Universalist grew rapidly and by the 1840s were the fifth largest religious group in the United States. Gradually, other groups stepped back from Calvinism and the Universalist lost ground from there on.

Unitarian thought came to the fore in New England in the late 1790s and in 1805 a Unitarian was appointed to the Chair of Theology at Harvard University. The theology in question here concerns the doctrine of the Trinity and the nature of Jesus. The Trinity, most of you will know refers to God as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, three natures of God, separate and one, co-equal and eternal. A mystery.

Some of you will know that this particularly doctrine was decided upon by a hand vote at the council of Nicea in 325. Many of those on the losing side of the vote also lost their lives: people took their theology much too seriously.

Anyhow, the remnant Puritan clergy around Boston, serving congregations we would now know as Congregational, began to notice that there was no mention of the Trinity in the Bible.

The question here is the nature of Jesus: was he a man or was he God? The old formulations was that he was God, therefore a part of the Trinity. The Unitarians came to the position that Jesus was a man, and that God was just one. God was not three, but one, a unity. Thus, the Unitarians.

Between 1800 and the 1830s many Congregational congregations hired Unitarian leaning clergy and eventually those congregations formed an organization, and new congregations were formed as the country enlarged in the years before the Civil war.

From the beginning Unitarian and Universalist clergy overlapped and many served in both denominations, there were many cooperative endeavors for social service and social change.

But, there were important class differences and rivalries that kept them apart until the 1950s when both groups had fallen on hard times and the merger began to take form.

Important for our consideration is this, while both groups began as the Liberal Christians, by the middle and late 19th century, many in both groups had moved to a scientific worldview and a religious humanism that would seem very familiar to us today.

And, in the century following the founding of Ethical Culture by Felix Adler, there was much cooperation and interchange between the Universalists, the Unitarians, Ethical Culture, Reformed Judaism, the Quakers and other liberal religious groups.

In fact, in 1868 free thinking Unitarians, Universalists, Reformed Jews and Quakers formed a group called the Free Religious Association to promulgate new and liberal religious views. The first person to sign the articles of incorporation of the Free Religious Association was that towering thinker of the 19th century, Ralph Waldo Emerson. And, ten years later, in 1878, our own Felix Adler became the President of the Free Religious Association, inaugurating his term with a spellbinding hour and forty minute address, delivered without notes.

His time with the Free Religious Association was short lived. The organization, he pointed out in his parting address, was all talk and no action. He took his energy back to the many projects he had launched in New York.

And, Adler tended to be dismissive of the Unitarians and Universalists from then on. But, I don't think you can dismiss the influence of the Free Religious Association on the formation of Ethical Culture. In the ten years before Adler took over as President, the

mostly Unitarian clergy of the Free Religious Association publish books, pamphlets and journals supporting the kind of ideas: freedom of conscience, new forms of religion, a scientific worldview, humanism, similar to the ideas that Adler would shape into Ethical Culture.

Also, despite Adler's lack of enthusiasm for Unitarians and Universalists, the histories of these groups overlap. In every effort for social change: women's right to vote, labor reform, peace activism, you can always find Ethical Culture people, Unitarians, Universalists, Reformed Jews, Quakers as well as radical Christians among the activists.

And, in the struggle for religious freedom and the advance of humanist thought, all have been present as well. An important moment for humanist such as ourselves is 1933 and the publication of the first Humanist Manifesto, a document calling for a new vision of a religion based in science with human beings at the fore. Unitarians, Universalists and Ethical Culture leaders all signed that document, and each of the subsequent Humanist Manifestos.

Additionally, over the decades of the 20th century, there has been a reciprocity of Unitarian & Universalist ministers and Ethical Culture Leaders. Not in any official way, but

not unlike the Unitarians and the Universalists in the 19th century, there was some swapping back and forth. Ethical Culture leaders have served Unitarian & Universalist congregations, and Unitarian and Universalist ministers have served Ethical Humanist congregations. I am not the first, as it happens.

And, not unlike the Unitarians and Universalists in the 19th century, there has been some sibling rivalry. To some extent, we compete in the same niche. We compete for the attention and affections of the same sorts of people.

However, there has been far more cooperation over the years than anything else, and that cooperation has enriched both groups. Pat Hoertdoerfer who was one of the most effective Religious Education Developers for the UUA, began her professional life in the Ethical Culture movement, and Ethical Culture groups have made wide use of UU religious education curriculums.

The Humanist Institute, which has become increasingly important in training new humanist leaders, has faculty members from both groups.

There is even an Ethical Culture Society, the Washington Ethical Society, that holds a dual membership: The Washington Ethical Society in Washington , DC, which is one of

our largest and busiest congregations. It is historically an Ethical Culture Society, but has also been a member Unitarian Universalist Congregation for about six years now.

And, at this point in time, there are significant similarities in what we believe, or, at least in what we say we believe.

James Luther Adams was the most influential theologian among American Unitarian Universalists of the 20th century, and he created an influential statement for Unitarian Universalists, which he called them the five smooth stones of religious liberalism. His list:

- "Religious liberalism depends on the principle that 'revelation' is continuous." Our religious tradition is a living tradition because we are always learning new truths.
- "All relations between persons ought ideally to rest on mutual, free consent and not on coercion." We freely choose to enter into relationship with one another.
- "Religious liberalism affirms the moral obligation to direct one's effort toward the establishment of a just and loving community. It is this which makes the role of the prophet central and indispensable in liberalism." Justice.

- "... [W]e deny the immaculate conception of virtue and affirm the necessity of social incarnation." Agency: Good things don't just happen, people make them happen.
- "[L]iberalism holds that the resources (divine and human) that are available for the achievement of meaningful change justify an attitude of ultimate optimism." Hope.

Contrast these with a recent Ethical Humanist statement: What beliefs do Ethical Societies teach?

- **Freedom of Belief:** When we stimulate our thinking with new insights and inspirations, our understanding of the world evolves, and we realize the full capacity of our human spirit.

- **Eliciting the Best:** It is by acting in a way that encourages the finest characteristics in others that we bring out the best in ourselves.
- **Respect for Human Worth:** We treat all people as having an inherent capacity for fairness, kindness, and living ethically.
- **Ethical Living:** When we put into practice ethical principles such as love, justice, honesty, and forgiveness, we experience harmony within ourselves and in our relationships.
- **Reverence for Life:** We cultivate the spiritual dimension in life by experiencing our interdependent connections to humanity, nature, and our inner values.

I won't belabor this, but even on a quick reading you can see that we are more alike than different in how we talk about what we believe.

So, there is much overlap, much cooperation, many similarities. And, unlike most other groups in the humanist pantheon, we both share a tradition of getting together on Sunday mornings. So, you might ask, what are the differences?

Well, I have some answers to that question, but summing them up is complicated by a couple of factors.

One is size: there are over a thousand Unitarian Universalist Congregations, and they are not all alike. Some are high church meeting in impressive buildings, some are small groups meeting in rented halls. Some are very formal, some militantly informal.

Also, there is the factor of time. The Unitarian Universalism I was introduced to nearly 35 years ago is quite different from what I have encountered in the last few years.

But, here are some of the differences between Unitarian Universalism, as I have encountered it and as I understand it, and Ethical Humanism, as I have encountered it and as I understand it.

The first difference to note is that a typical Sunday morning at a UU congregation will feel a lot more churchy than most of the Ethical Culture platforms and meetings as I have encountered them.

This correlates with what I've heard over the years around here from people who have attended UU services and ended up at an Ethical Humanist Society. It just feels too churchy, people say.

Well, that is a part of the UU heritage, both groups grew from liberal Christian roots, so Sunday morning is more closely patterned on a Protestant Sunday service.

Then, there is the matter of religious inclusion. As Ethical Humanists, we proudly proclaim that we are non-theistic, we take no theological position on a belief or a disbelief in God, we have no creedal test as to what you must or what you cannot believe, and we welcome people who may hold a wide variety of beliefs.

But, while we welcome a variety of beliefs, we really don't want to hear about them. We do not talk much about what people actually believe, beyond our shared Ethical Humanist principles.

Unitarian Universalist also welcome a wide range of beliefs, but in my experience, there is much more attention to the cultivation of each individual's faith journey. When I preached in a Unitarian Universalist congregation, I would look out at a congregation and see some humanists, some stalwart atheists, some people who believe in God in some vague fashion, a couple of pagans, a smattering of practicing Buddhists, a Christian or two, some years a Hindu. What is more upfront in a UU congregation is a conscious attention to faith development. I would tend to say a couple of times a year: 'I don't

particularly care what you believe, but I am interested to know what those beliefs mean to you and how you are engaging with your chosen path so as to grow in your faith.”

I don't think we do that as well, and I wonder sometimes why that is so.

Another difference I see is with the Unitarian Universalists is an embrace of music, symbols and rituals to deepen the Sunday morning experience. I spoke a couple weekends ago about the differences between Religious Humanism and Secular Humanism, one of those differences being a tolerance of symbols and ritual, such as lighting candles, singing, music, ringing a bell, etc..

UUs tend to be much more comfortable with this, though that has not always been so. In the past, many UU congregations tended to be more militantly humanist and atheist. When I was first in the ministry, I could schedule hymns that had the word God in them at the most twice a month, if I used two hymns that used the word God in the same service, however poetic or slight that use might be, and despite the fact that there was a third hymn with no deistical reference whatsoever, there would still be hell to pay at the coffee hour.

I am not active in UU congregations anymore, but I attend from time to time, and it seems that that is much less the case.

That's about it for significant differences. There are other aspects of congregational life where we do as well or better, at least this Ethical Humanist Society, which is the one I know best, and the Unitarian Universalist congregations I've known.

Our ability to form and sustain real community for instance, where people know one another and care for one another, this may wax or wane over the years, but the capacity of the two groups is much the same.

Or, the ease with which we equip and empower our members to engage in the work of making the world a better place, either individually or together, again, while that waxes and wanes over the years, I think both communities do a decent job of connecting people to opportunities to help.

There are other facets of community life: welcoming newcomers, raising money, maintaining a building, having fun: again, these things can be up and down, but I don't think either the Ethical Humanists or the Unitarian Universalist have any particular advantage one over the other.

One criticism of Unitarian Universalism that carries some weight is the observation if you try to embrace every different kind of belief you end up watering down your own message, nobody will know what it is you actually stand for. It is a valid criticism, and one that many Unitarian Universalist groups struggle with.

But I will say this, and this is important: The Unitarian Universalist have managed to hold onto their numbers and not to shrink over the last 30 years. While most mainline Protestant groups, in fact, most organized religious groups in the United States: the Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, American Baptists, Lutherans and others have been hemorrhaging members and closing congregations for years, the Unitarian Universalists have held steady. Some years the Unitarian Universalist Association reports a gain of a half percent, some years a drop of about the same. But the UUs have created new congregations, revitalized others, seen some decline some places and have had a few congregations close over the last twenty years.

But they've held their numbers year to year, and that is an accomplishment.

What lessons might we draw from this? What lessons do I see?

Well, only one for this morning, and it is a lesson drawn not only from successful UU congregations, but from the most successful Ethical Culture congregations that I have experienced: and that is the incorporation of music and other artistic elements into the Sunday morning experience. We need to incorporate music, art, ritual, as well as engage the mind. We are not a lecture society, we are a congregation gathered on Sunday mornings to find connection, enlarge our understanding *and* renew our spirits.

Which is why I built us a washtub bass.