

# Liberal Religion at Another Crossroad

By

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Last Sunday I delivered a sermon by Rev. John H. Dietrich entitled, *Liberal Religion at the Cross-Roads*, which he first gave nearly a hundred years ago in 1924. Dietrich believed, like Christianity at large, that Unitarianism, although more open to scientific evidence than other religions, was still reluctant to give up some traditional ideas and to fully modernize its thinking. He was particularly bothered that our liberal religion still referenced devotion to the fatherhood of God and to the supremacy of Jesus—suggesting we still believed in the existence of a personal god and that the height of human morality and truth was already discovered by and culminated in the teachings of one man 2,000 years ago.

Dietrich's concerns, which were shared by others at the time, led to a widespread schism in Unitarianism that has become known as the Humanist Debate. In 2003, Rev. William F. Schulz, a former President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Executive Director of Amnesty International-USA, a Professor at Meadville Lombard Theological School, and a Senior Fellow at Harvard—an impressive set of credentials—wrote an editorial in *UU World* magazine, entitled, "Our Humanist Legacy." In it, he refers to Nietzsche's infamous claim that "God is dead," explaining the existentialist belief that "When God is gone, faith turns to humanity."<sup>1</sup>

This was so for Dietrich who was among a handful of Unitarian ministers urging our liberal religion to make the right choice at the crossroad between tradition and greater reliance upon our own human agency. Schulz says:

Their story is the story of *religious humanism*, a religious movement that emphasized human capabilities, especially the human capacity to reason; that adopted the scientific method to search for truth; and that promoted the right of all humans to develop to their full potential. It is the story of a movement that sought to construct what the Rev. John Dietrich called a "religion without God," shifting the focus of religious faith from divinity to humanity.<sup>2</sup>

Schulz goes on to say that "For more than a decade, from 1916—when Dietrich and another Unitarian colleague, the Rev. Curtis Reese, began preaching 'humanism' to their congregations—through the 1920s, Unitarians debated the merits of a strictly human centered, scientifically minded, ethically focused religion."<sup>3</sup> (Reese, coincidentally, Dietrich's best friend, came to Unitarianism, like me, from the Southern Baptist tradition, and even went to Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, where I attended before deciding to leave the Southern Baptist faith and Christianity altogether.)

Dietrich and Reese, like many in their day, foresaw a time in the near future where religion would finally lose its influence over humanity, replaced by the knowledge achieved through sound reason and empirical science. Worried traditionalists saw this eventuality too, which is why some began pushing back against the coming tide, resulting in a new kind of Christianity our society hadn't seen before—Fundamentalism. Theologian Karen Armstrong says, "American Protestants were the first to use it. In the early decades of the twentieth century, some of them started calling themselves 'fundamentalists'<sup>4</sup> to distinguish themselves from the more 'liberal' Protestants, who

were, in their opinion, entirely distorting the Christian faith.”<sup>5</sup> Whereas liberalism was born in reaction against superstitious and mythical thinking, fundamentalism was born in reaction against liberalism and the decline of religion it was leading to. And nowhere was this threat more overt than in the call of those like Dietrich, Reese, and other Unitarian ministers for a new religion of humanity focusing on human welfare, potential, and agency—a religion in which belief in sacred scriptures, miracles, or even in God was no longer necessary.

Here, it's important to remember the distinction between the philosophy formally known as Humanism with a capital “H,” founded in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by thinkers like Dietrich and Reese as outlined in *The Humanist Manifesto*, and Renaissance humanism with a small “h.” The latter kind of humanism is simply the belief or feeling that human beings have the capacity to figure things out for themselves by exploring the natural world and making rational inferences based upon their findings. It is a positive belief in human nature and agency. This was the attitude of the early Greek philosophers 2,600 years ago that was rediscovered during the Renaissance beginning in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and that flourished during the Enlightenment well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century, resulting in a greater desire for creating societies that foster human welfare, dignity, and individual potential by guaranteeing freedom, reason, and tolerance.

It should also be understood that Unitarianism, which formally emerged during the Renaissance, but is an idea that has been around since Christ—literally—is synonymous with lower-case humanism. It was the original and uncontroversial belief of his followers that Jesus was but a man whose profound teachings they further thought could change the world. Because it would have been anathema and sacrilege for any Jew to worship a human being, and all of Jesus' early followers were Jewish, the question of his humanity would never have been raised, even if they did think, like other historic Jewish figures, he had been blessed and anointed by Yahweh.

It wasn't until some Gentiles, the apostle Paul in particular, took interest in the once persecuted and exotic Jewish sect of Jesus' followers that he was transformed from human Jesus to mythical Christ. Greeks and Romans had no issues with worshipping human beings, nor believing humans could become gods, or were the half-divine/half-human children of gods. So once Christianity—not Jesusanity—became the official Roman Religion, a debate arose between those who believed he was merely human and those who considered him divine. The debate was settled by the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, when the authorities officially declared that Jesus and God were the same, marking the beginning of Trinitarian doctrine. The Trinity developed in reaction against the original Unitarian belief in one god, which excluded Jesus or anyone or anything else from also being divine. Hence, Unitarian theology was synonymous with having a “humanistic Christology,” the belief that Jesus was only human and could not be a god or God.

As I said, Unitarianism, as a religion, was formally founded during the Renaissance after the Reformation caused the Roman Catholic empire to lose some of its tight control over religious expression. That's when it was established as the official religion in Transylvania, guaranteeing religious freedom and tolerance. Unfortunately, it was short lived due to the accidental death of Unitarian King John Sigismund Zápolya, after which his Unitarian Bishop, Ferenc Dávid was

arrested and imprisoned for claiming that it made no more sense to pray to Jesus than it did to Mary, since both were mere mortals. Dávid died in a cold, wet dungeon in the Fortress of Deva only six months later, in 1579.

That was more than 1500 years after Jesus, and more than 1300 years past the Nicene Creed, and the Unitarians were still promoting a humanistic Christology, still insisting Jesus was only human. And it was the point Dietrich was still making only a hundred years ago when rejecting the lingering notion that Jesus remains superior among men. "I am too thorough-going an evolutionist to listen to any enthusiasm to the assertion of any unique virtue in Jesus, which places him 2,000 years ago at the top of human achievement," he said. "I believe that his moral excellence has been equaled many times, if not excelled, just as I am certain that his intellectual grasp of life and of nature, remarkable indeed for his day, has been very far surpassed by our general progress in intelligence since his time."<sup>6</sup>

The point of this brief history is that humanistic thinking has been part of the definition of Unitarianism since its very beginning and has remained so. Again, the name itself is synonymous with "humanistic Christology," the belief in Jesus' humanity. But this belief does not diminish Jesus in the eyes of Unitarians, who initially saw their religion as no less Christian than anyone else's, which is still the case in Eastern Europe. Christianity was about putting his humanitarian teachings into practice for the benefit of human beings, not for stroking the ego of primitive, punitive, authoritarian god. So, given that small "h" humanism has been one of Unitarianism's defining theological qualities, and the positive attitude toward human beings, human agency, and human potential as demonstrated by the life, teachings, and death of Jesus himself, it seems only inevitable that those like Dietrich and Reese would eventually come along, and that capital "H" Humanism would naturally be born of Unitarianism, its genetic mother.

When Dietrich spoke of Unitarianism's crossroad a century ago, he was not asking its adherents to adopt an entirely new ideology, only to complete what had begun more than a millennia ago, to let go of superstitious thinking entirely, particularly references to a personal god and to the supremacy of Jesus, and to fully own our own role and ability to advance human civilization and human wellbeing ourselves. At the time, Dietrich believed this could only happen by embracing science and subjecting all our beliefs, including—especially—our religious beliefs to its findings.

Back then it seemed Unitarianism, especially in North America, was well on its way to doing so, despite the uproar stirred by Dietrich and the big "H" Humanists who were also Unitarians. In fact, as recently as Schulz's 2000 article, most would have considered the controversy long resolved in the Humanists' favor. "After all," he says, "46 percent of Unitarian Universalists reported in 1998 that they regarded themselves as theologically humanist—more than twice the number who identified with the second most common perspective, nature-centered spirituality, and far more than the 13 percent who called themselves theists or the 9.5 percent who described themselves as Christians."<sup>7</sup>

These statistics have long been corroborated by others, including as early as 1961, when the Unitarian Universalist Association was formed. According to Michael Werner's 2013 book, *Regaining Balance: The Evolution of the UUA*, "The 1961 UUA Preliminary Reports of the Commission of the Free Church in a Changing World concluded that with only 2.9% of UU's believing in a

supernatural being and 52% believing in an explicit Humanism that the Unitarian Universalist Association should seek to build the newly merged Association on an evolving, progressive, scientific basis.”<sup>8</sup>

Jump ahead 44 years later, to a 2005 Commission on Appraisal report entitled, *Engaging our Theological Diversity* that asked UU participants, “What holds us together?” The responses varied enough to make us wonder if any of the participants had any idea what our religion is supposed to be about. Hence, the report concludes that “Despite consensus within the church that the liberal message of Unitarian Universalism is important in this troubled world, we find it difficult to articulate that message clearly.”<sup>9</sup> We know we’re important, we just don’t know why! This identity crisis, as I argue in *The Gadfly Papers*, is the result of the poorly handled merger that immediately severed us from our historic liberal religious roots with no process for explaining what this new religion called Unitarian Universalism was about. “We too frequently behave as though Unitarian Universalism was born without historical or theological antecedents,” Walter P. Herz wrote in his 1999 Skinner House publication, *Redeeming Time*. “We will continue to ignore our past only at the peril of losing our identity as a religious people.”<sup>10</sup>

Today, anyone paying attention must conclude this is precisely what has happened. It’s as if we came to the crossroad Dietrich pointed out, started down the right path, but then turned around and went back the other direction, toward authoritarianism and dogmatism, and an explicit rejection of humanism, reason, science, and the inconvenient truths they often lead to. The identity crisis prompted by the merger created an ever-widening vacuum that ethically immature and irrational opportunists filled with nonsense before any of us realized what was happening. In his article, William Schulz also says, “The truth is that a lot of nonsense passes for religion in this twenty-first century, as it has in all the preceding centuries. Religious humanism is willing to call a charlatan a charlatan, and while reason is by no means the only vehicle of religious exploration, we abandon it altogether only at our peril.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet abandoning it we have, as evidenced by two letters of condemnation written in response to *The Gadfly Papers*. Less than a day after I began giving the book away in 2019, an open letter, signed initially by over 300 UU ministers and eventually by more than 500, explicitly stated, “We recognize that a zealous commitment to ‘logic’ and ‘reason’ over all other forms of knowing is one of the foundational stones of White Supremacy Culture.” In this chilling claim, logic and reason, once the cornerstones of our liberal religion, are nullified as white supremacy and deemed inferior to unspecified “other forms of knowing.” What could they be? Faith, feeling, instinct?

The other letter came only a month later, in the form of a letter of censure to me from the UU Ministers Association. It similarly said, “we cannot ignore the fact that logic has often been employed in white supremacy culture to stifle dissent, minimize expressions of harm, and to require those who suffer to prove the harm by that culture’s standards.” If reason stifles dissent, it is only the fault of those afraid of appearing foolish by arguing against it, or of having their own beliefs disproven by engaging in rational debate. And, of course, where logic is expected, any claim is expected to be based on sound evidence. Sound reason can’t minimize or erase such evidence. On the contrary, reason depends on such evidence.

And this gets us to the crossroads our liberal religion faces today, the choice between illogic and logic, between unreason and reason, between progress and stagnation. Sadly, this crossroad is a

step further back than the fork in the road we had reached in Dietrich's time. Now, rather than taking our rational religion a step further by fully embracing science and, with it, human agency, we must backtrack to begin reclaiming reason itself. This is tragic for our religion, which is rooted in small "h" humanism and its belief in our ability to use reason to understand the natural world. But the crossroads we are now at is the same crossroads the whole world is at and has been since the first creature emerged from the primordial sludge.

It is the urge of life itself to become increasingly aware of its environment, which ultimately includes awareness of the entire Universe. In this sense, life is the Universe's attempt to become self-aware, and our species, as a self-aware species, is part of its awakening. Just as infants become increasingly conscious as they better differentiate themselves from others and their environments, and adults healthier as they become more aware of their unconscious drives and habits, our task as a species is to grow beyond our unconscious drives and delusions to face and cope with reality as it is, on its own terms. This is what a mature person does, and it is what a maturing species must do.

But so far, each time our species has poked its unconscious head into the light to make brief advances toward greater enlightenment, fear and denial forces us back down. Brief but unprecedented advances followed the Age of Antiquity, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment, when the use of reason flourished. But each period was halted by those too frightened to go on facing reality, those who would force the rest of us to go along with the more comforting delusions contained in nonsensical myths, preposterous dogmas, and dusty old books. Doing so once led to a thousand years of unconsciousness and stagnation, during the period we call the Dark Age. Most recently, it followed the Enlightenment, during which some who are now considered brilliant philosophers made their names assaulting the use and value of reason. And this is what led to our postmodern milieu—the widespread rejection of reality in favor of whatever the hell we prefer to believe—that is now leading to the destruction of our planet, the halting of human progress, and to the stunting of individual potential.

This Counter-Enlightenment movement began in defense of faith, which required the denigration of reason. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant found errors in the use of reason, then used them to argue that reason can never lead us to the truth. "I therefore found it necessary," he said, "to deny knowledge to make room for faith."<sup>12</sup> Philosopher Stephen Hicks says, "For Kant, preserving faith led him to deny reason, while for a Hegel preserving the spirit of Judeo-Christian metaphysics led him to be more anti-reason and anti-individualist than Kant ever was."<sup>13</sup> Stephens also says, "the irrationalists divided over whether religion is true—Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard being theists, and Schopenhauer and Nietzsche being atheists—but all shared a contempt for reason. All condemned reason as a totally artificial and limited faculty, one that must be abandoned in the bold quest to embrace reality. Perhaps Kant had prohibited access to reality—but he had shown only that reason could not get us there. That left other options open to us: faith, feeling, and instinct."<sup>14</sup> Indeed, these seem to be the criterion of accessing truth as promoted by the UU Association today; faith, feeling, and instinct, topped off with a desperate and irrational contempt for sound reason.

I could continue giving such examples but must begin to close. I hope I have said enough for you to see the historic pattern in which reason takes brief hold, leading to unprecedented advances, but is soon condemned as useless and evil in order to reestablish the superiority of our unconscious and superstitious beliefs. So, the crossroads we face today is not new. Nor does it belong exclusively to Unitarian Universalism. It is the same crossroads humanity has been striving to reach throughout our existence; only to reach it, take a few steps in the right direction before, out of fear and ignorance, we second guess ourselves and turn around to go backwards.

Perhaps this should be expected of society in general, but our liberal religion, as we have seen, was founded upon the very principles that drive humanity forward, especially our commitment to reason and empirical evidence. Today, irrationalism is rampant, and the world is in another age of Endarkenment—and age of convenient lies rather than inconvenient truths—which is why our liberal religion must not only survive but thrive, so that we can again help our fellow human beings transform their hostilities into hope, their fears into awe and wonder, and their ignorance into curiosity and courage. This is our moment. Now is when we are needed most. We have reached the crossroad. Let us choose the correct direction and, this time, there is no turning back.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/unitarian-universalisms-humanist-legacy>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Coined by Curtis Lee Laws (1868-1946), a Baptist preacher, in 1920.

<sup>5</sup> Armstrong, Karen, *The Battle for God: A History of Fundamentalism*, (Random House, New York, NY, 2000. 2001) p. xii.

<sup>6</sup> Dietrich, John H., "Liberal Religion at the Cross-Roads," An address delivered before the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, published by The Unitarian Laymen's League, Minneapolis, Minn., September 28, 1924.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/unitarian-universalisms-humanist-legacy>

<sup>8</sup> Werner, Michael, *Regaining Balance: The Evolution of the UUA*, Religious Humanism Press, Hamden, CT, 2013, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> UUA Commission on Appraisal, *Engaging our Theological Diversity*, UUA, Boston, MA, May 2005, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Herz, Walter P., ed., *Redeeming Time: Endowing Your Church with the Power of Covenant*, Skinner House Press, Boston, MA, 1999, p. 117.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/unitarian-universalisms-humanist-legacy>

<sup>12</sup> Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Pure Reason*, [1781], Translated by Norman Kemp Smith, MacMillan, 1929, p. Bxxx.

<sup>13</sup> Hicks, Stephen, R.C., *Explaining Postmodernism*, Ockham's Razor Publishing, 2004, 2018, p. 44.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 51.