

Not God, Not the Devil: A Humble Humanism

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I'd like to start today with a handful of images and ideas, some based on things that really happened, some based on stories that are made up but speak to reality in some way.

First, Job. You remember Job, from the Hebrew Bible? Poor guy. God and the devil had a little wager and messed up Job terribly. His extensive bad luck wasn't bad luck at all, it turns out. It was the battle of the deities working itself out in his life.

Second, the Salem Witch Trials, when twenty people were executed between February 1692 and May 1693, most of them women, on the grounds that the devil had entered them and made them into witches. Four other accused individuals and an infant child died in prison. Of course, as the Hebrew Bible says, you shall not suffer a witch to live. I've met a Filipino gay man who went through his own personal Salem witch trial maybe 20 years ago now, when he had an exorcism performed on him to remove the homosexual devil he had.

Third, Robert Oppenheimer, the physicist who played an important role in developing the atomic bomb. During the first artificial nuclear explosion, Oppenheimer recalled, he found himself thinking of a verse from the Hindu scripture known as the Bhagavad Gita, which translates as "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds."

Fourth, a verse from Leonard Bernstein's marvelous music and theater piece known as the "Mass." This verse appears in the song "God Said." Here's the verse:

"God said take charge of my zoo. I made these creatures for you
So He won't mind if we wipe out a species or two."

The song's point is summed up in a bridge that occurs a bit later:

"God made us the boss. God gave us the cross.
We turned it into a sword to spread the Word of the Lord.
We use His holy decrees to do whatever we please
And it was good, yeah, and it was good, yeah, and it was goddamn good."

Finally, something I learned while studying the struggle over inclusion of lesbians and gay men in the United Methodist Church for my dissertation: while LGBT people and their allies argued that their experience was that they could be sexual minorities with deeply rich spiritual lives and calls to ministry, the religious conservatives rejected this claim. Their counterargument was that since human nature is "fallen", human experience is also fallen and is therefore not a good guide for living a properly Christian life. And what does "fallen" mean in this context? It means that the devil is having his way with fallen humanity and that we cannot rely on our experiences since they may literally be of the devil. And certainly, anyone who thought they could be a lesbian or gay man and be a Methodist pastor was being tutored by Mephistopheles.

If you're like me, all of these snippets bother you at least a little, even if for different reasons. The story of Job turns God into something of a sociopath and in any case is a disturbing way to comfort oneself when bad things happen to good people: a decent human being is suffering because God is testing their piety. The Salem Witch Trials should horrify all of us: innocent people put to death because of a moral panic that got out of hand. Whatever we may think about the use of the atomic bomb in World War II, Oppenheimer's comment is startling and worrisome. Are human beings now Homo Thanatos, the ones to destroy our planet and all the life on it, including our own? Another song from the Bernstein Mass sings of the "world without end at the end of the world", when humanity has "gone on a permanent vacation, gone to await the next creation." And even if we don't wipe out humanity, we are certainly good at wiping out a species or two. Our playing God has resulted in the extinction of many species; was it really our right to do that? Finally, the conservative Methodist rejection of human experience as "fallen" in favor of a particular reading of the Bible that just happens to exclude LGBT people from spiritual leadership, sacred marriage, and religious valuation should trouble anyone who believes both in the well-being of all people and the meaningfulness of relying on our senses.

So, what I'd like to do today is propose an alternative to these different ways of making sense of life, an approach I call a humble humanism. But this approach is not simply the same as the way some UU humanists think about humanism. Consider, for example, the way the UUA describes humanist teachings in its six sources. Humanist teachings are those "which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit." Fair enough. But is that all humanism can be? Respect for science and suspicion about religiosity? The UUA definition says nothing about what humanist ethics or religion look like, nor how we might understand a humanist commitment to social justice.

And there's more. The UUA's definition is not in any sense spiritual. Now that might seem like a strange thing to say about humanism but in fact spirituality doesn't need to involve a personal God. It's about human growth toward wholeness and the human capacity to have experiences of awe, joy, and gratitude that go beyond our making and perhaps even our understanding. To my mind, a humanism that does not include such spirituality is both incomplete and insufficient. And so, I offer today a few ideas about what a humble humanism might look like.

For starters, I should probably define the phrase "humble humanism" itself since these are two words that are rarely strung together. By humanism I mean the claim that there is neither a personal God nor a personal devil, out there or in here, working their way with each of us individually and with the world. It's just us human beings, for better or worse, and often for both.

Consider the above images and stories. The Job story is an elegant way of struggling with the age-old question of why bad things happen to good people. The Salem Witch Trials were basically an episode of mass psychosis, and the Filipino guy I met who'd been exorcised simply showed how harmful religion can be. The conservative Methodist insistence that experience is "fallen" and therefore untrustworthy is not merely harmful, it's philosophically problematic. After all, how do conservative Methodists know that experience is "fallen"? Because the Bible says so. And how did they learn what the Bible says? Through the experience of reading it. So, let's be clear: these conservative Methodists are simply prioritizing their experience over

everyone else's. Any humanism worth its salt will be very suspicious of the prioritizing of any experience that leads to harm.

So much for the humanism piece. What about the humility piece? For me this has two elements: first, the willingness and ability to acknowledge that there are aspects of our experience that are beyond our making and even our understanding: creativity, awe, even the capacity to love. Some humanists believe that these and all other aspects of human experience can be understood in reductionist ways, through biology, psychology, neuroscience, or sociology. A humble humanism rejects reductionism, opting instead for an expansive view of the universe in which we live and giving us many more experiences and capacities for which to be grateful.

A humble humanism also says that while we might have the ability to play God or the devil, it's ethically better that we not do so, and that if we must play God, we should do it with extreme caution. Becoming death, destroyer of worlds, is not a good thing. Wiping out a species or two or even the whole planet is – it sounds so banal – simply morally unacceptable. A humble humanism says that since it's just us, for better or worse, let's strive for better rather than worse.

What does a humble humanism look like in practice? Today I'll reflect briefly on ethics, politics, humanist humility as a spiritual practice, and end with a consideration of humanist religion. None of the ideas I'm proposing today are entirely new but this is a new way of putting them together and I hope it will invite reflection about what role, if any, humanism plays in your life.

In all of the reading I've done on secular ethics, I've noticed a commonality, namely the reliance over and over again on the Golden Rule as a basis for ethical decision-making. Now, there's nothing particularly wrong with the Golden Rule but I find it incomplete. What if someone doesn't want to be treated the way you do? While there are certain traits that all people share in common, we have enough cultural and psychological differences that relying solely on the Golden Rule runs the risk of coming off as a kind of color-blindness, and I don't mean that in a good way. In order to live out the Golden Rule properly, we need to acknowledge that people are simultaneously individuals, human beings, and members of differently valued social groups, and we need to treat people, not as we would want to be treated, but as they would want to be treated. This means learning how other people want to be treated but not just individualistically; humanist ethics leads inevitably to humanist politics since compassion demands of us that we intend others to have good lives.

But before we turn to humanist politics, it's worth returning to a concept that I've shared with a number of you many times: the idea of the two wolves within us. This story probably comes from the Diné people; I've never been able to track it down properly. In the story, a grandfather tells his grandson that there are two wolves fighting within each person, a good wolf representing all of humanity's best traits and a bad wolf representing all of humanity's bad traits. The grandson asks which wolf will win. The grandfather replies: the wolf you feed. This story matters for us in the context of humanist ethics because if there is neither God nor devil outside us making us good or bad it's entirely up to us to feed the good wolf, though we may find strength to feed the good wolf coming from sources beyond our willpower. Indeed, each of us is the only one who can feed our good wolf though we can support each other in our good wolf feeding practices. And this is yet another reason why we should not become Death, destroyer of

worlds or species: to do so is to feed our bad wolf, and everything we do to strengthen our bad wolf gives it more energy to overcome our good wolf. Humanist ethics, then, are about seeking to understand and meet human needs and wants on the grounds that, as our first principle says, every person has inherent dignity and worth. And humanist ethics is about striving to make consistently good choices about our ways of being in the world because we know the bad choices are there for the making and will have damaging consequences.

Humanist politics, as suggested above, emerges from humanist ethics, especially the part about wanting everyone to have a good life. Humanist politics relies on a particular understanding of what it means to be a person, an understanding I've suggested above: people are simultaneously individuals, human beings, and members of differently valued social groups. This way of thinking about people need not be restricted to humanists but it fits well with the humanist commitment to focus on human beings and the world around us rather than on deities of whatever moral stripe.

A humanist politics, put simply, is treating people appropriately within these three categories. As individuals people should be recognized for their uniqueness and not be punished for irrelevant factors about them. As human beings, people should have the resources, support, and opportunities they need to live well in light of the various common traits that make us human. For example, as emotional beings, we can only thrive if our lives are emotionally safe and we are free to experience the emotions we have without danger or discrimination. A humanist politics asks whether all people live in a society where they are able to thrive emotionally, and if not, what to do about that. Finally, a humanist politics acknowledges that people belong to different social groups, some valued, some devalued, and some dehumanized, and struggles to remake society so that all social groups are equally valued and equally understood to be fully human. Many Unitarian Universalist political and social stances follow naturally from this way of thinking about politics, even if we don't specifically name it as humanist.

Humanism rarely has much to say about humility, and in fact the humanist Unitarian Universalist source has a distinct lack of humility in it. As a reminder, humanist teachings are those "which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit." Now, I'm not saying idolatry is a good thing, but this language almost suggests that too much attention to the spirit is misguided. Again, I think there's room for more explicit humility in humanism worth its salt. We've already seen a touch of humility in the two wolves story and in the notion of politics as understanding and responding to human needs in a compassionate, thoughtful way. Here are some additional ways to think about humanist humility.

The Job story is a great place to start because it seems so obviously to have been written by a person or by people grappling with why bad things happen to good people when God controls everything that happens and when God is good. The most common way of interpreting the answer in the Job story, incidentally, is that God is not always good but since God is God, we humans had better shut up and just enjoy the wonders that God made. This story is one reason why I'm a humanist, by the way: nothing could compel me to find the God of this story worthy of worship.

But if the Job story is not a good answer to the question of why bad things happen to good people, what is? A humanism that tries to reduce human comprehension to the natural and social sciences? Are we simply the product of our genes or our socialization or the way our neurons fire? A humble humanism rejects such reductionism and doesn't pretend to understand why everything happens. If this acknowledgement makes us look a little mystical, I can live with that.

Even the versions of Christianity that claim to have an answer to everything often fall short when asked why a good God would allow bad things to happen to good people. They have some stock phrases, such as "God was testing his faith" or "It's okay, she's at home in heaven with God now." But sooner or later even the most conservative Christians come back to, "God works in mysterious ways." And a humble humanist would respond that secular reality also works in mysterious ways. We don't know why one sibling wound up a huge success in the business world and the other died in a car accident that wasn't his fault. We don't why two similar people have such different romantic luck. We don't know why one addict got clean and stayed that way and another addict relapsed multiple times. And so on. Some aspects of reality we can understand through the study of biology, sociology, psychology, neuroscience, anthropology, and other windows into the human condition. But some things will always happen for no good reason. Humble humanists don't find this bothersome. Reality is simply beyond our understanding sometimes.

Another example of humanist humility is the willingness to acknowledge that some processes are larger than the human ego without involving a personal God. Given the power of creativity in my life, as something I experience working through me, something I access without being completely in charge of, I'm more than willing to understand creativity as a kind of holiness. Creativity as I've experienced it is both within and beyond human beings, something we can harness and use, and which we usually use for good, but which we don't entirely control and which we didn't exactly create. The philosopher and naturalistic theologian Henry Nelson Wieman understood creativity somewhat like this, naming it a dynamic process. He has a wonderful quote summing up how he understands creativity, which goes as follows: "Creativity is not God in the traditional sense of that word. But neither does it operate under the control of human purpose." This understanding of creativity makes complete sense to me and it comes from someone who today we would probably call a humanist.

Finally, humanists are capable of having deep spiritual experiences born of humility. One particular humanist, the sociologist of religion Phil Zuckerman, has developed the term "aweism", by which he means the capacity to be filled with awe. I'd like to read two extended quotes by Zuckerman, the first on aweism in particular [*Living the Secular Life*, pp. 209-210] and the second summing up Zuckerman's own experience with life, which I find quite inspiring [*Living the Secular Life*, p. 212]. Here's the first quote:

"Aweism encapsulates the notion that existence is ultimately a beautiful mystery, that being alive is a wellspring of wonder, and that the deepest questions of existence, creation, time, and space are so powerful as to inspire deep feelings of joy, poignancy, and sublime awe. Aweism humbly, happily, rests on a belief that no one will ever really know why we are here or how the universe came into being, or why, and this insight renders us weak in the knees while simultaneously spurring us on to dance. An aweist is someone who admits that living is wonderfully mysterious

and that life is a profound experience. An aweist [believes] that while certain problems exist to be solved, deep mysteries exist to be enjoyed and unsolved – and we are happier when we accept that the universe and existence are just such mysteries.”

And here’s the second quote:

“A lack of belief in [a personal] God does not render this world any less wondrous, lush, mystifying, or amazing. A freethinking, secular orientation does not mean that one experiences a cold, colorless existence, devoid of aesthetic inspiration, mystical wonder, unabashed appreciation, existential joy, or a deep sense of connection with others, with nature, and with the incomprehensible. Quite the contrary. One need not have God to feel and experience awe. One just needs life.”

Or, as Peter Mayer has put it, everything is holy now. Peter Mayer might be a traditional believer, but since he is a Catholic turned Unitarian Universalist, somehow, I doubt it. I bet he is an aweist humanist of some sort. And I think there’s a reason that the most secular of humanists listen to Peter Mayer perform “Holy Now” and weep.

Aweism as Zuckerman describes it and Mayer sings about it is powerful, but it is still a purely individualistic experience. What about religion? We are all here together today and some of us are probably humble humanists. What can we say about humble humanist religion? An answer can be found in our simple closing hymn: From you I receive. To you I give. Together we share and from this we live. That’s humble humanist religion in a nutshell. No God, no devil, just the life we build together caring for each other. Many other answers are possible; this one is a start.

My friends, Unitarian Universalism invites us to work toward wholeness in any way that has integrity for us while benefitting the world beyond us. May whatever you find beautiful or useful in humble humanism inspire you regardless of your path, and may we all take seriously the power of both humanism and humility in building the land we seek. Amen and blessed be.