

Six Sources: Part 5

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Today is Part 5 of our sermon series examining the 6 Sources of our Unitarian Universalist faith. This morning we will be focusing on: “Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.”

I love religious humanism. I love the role of religious humanism in Unitarian Universalism. I love belonging to a church where I don't have to check my mind, my intellect, my ability to reason at the door of the Sanctuary. I love belonging to a faith that believes Science is real. (Today, more than ever, we need to lift up and bear witness to that truth.) I love being part of a tradition that places a focus on human potential and human responsibility, rather than a passive reliance on the will of God, and the sense of fatality—and futility—that often accompanies such a reliance. I love worshipping alongside atheists and agnostics.

One of the first services I attended here at UUCJ, long before I ever began working here, included our own Jay Huebner giving a science lesson to our RE kids during a Message for All Ages. It was a revelation. The idea that a religion would so enthusiastically embrace science and the scientific process as integral parts of the spiritual formation of its members was illuminating and inspiring.

I love the optimism of our humanism. I love the fact that we, as Unitarian Universalists, are a hope-filled people, who are ever looking forward, not backwards. We are not threatened by new revelations of science or reason that might force us to re-think all that we thought we knew about Life, the Universe and Everything. We welcome exploration, experimentation, and progress in all forms, whether, technological, theological, philosophical, or social. Our faith is not interested in being the self-appointed guardian of That Which Was. Rather, ours is a faith that inspires each of us to boldly go... where no one has gone before. You could say we are the “Faith of Tomorrow, Today”

These gifts come to our faith by way of the values embedded in humanism.

Now Unitarian Universalism may be unique as compared to other religions regarding the emphasis we place on Reason... but in all fairness, it is worth noting that we are not the *only* faith tradition that values Reason as a pathway to Truth.

Now that we have reached this 5th Source in our sermon series, I can finally offer up for our collective consideration a parallel-construct regarding Sources of truth, wisdom, and inspiration found in another faith tradition that looks quite a bit like our own model, and therefore might offer us some lessons to learn.

John Wesley was an 18th century Christian theologian most famous for being the founder of the Methodists. Wesley is also known for having developed a model that, much like our 6 Unitarian Universalist Sources, attempts to identify and categorize, through a theological lens, various pathways to ultimate Truth through his faith—which, for Wesley, was Christianity. This model has come to be known as the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral.” As you might guess from its name, Wesley’s model has 4 sides (or sources): 1. Scripture. 2. Tradition. 3. Reason. 4. Experience.

Even though it was designed by a Christian for Christianity, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral actually bears several similarities to our UU Sources—at least the ones we have studied so far. *Our* first source, Direct Experience, is essentially Wesley’s fourth. Our second, third, and fourth sources—Prophets, the Wisdom of World Religions, and Judeo-Christian Teachings—would broadly fall into Wesley’s first *and* second sources, AKA, the Scriptures and Traditions. Finally our 5th Source of Reason is the exact equivalent of Wesley’s 3rd.

So, superficially at least, we UUs broadly share the same *categories* of sources found in Wesley’s Model. The *big* difference between our 6 Sources and Wesley’s Quadrilateral is that Wesley *rank-ordered* his sources with an understanding that although all his sources worked together, there was definitely a hierarchy—with Christian Scripture at the top of the pyramid. Our UU sources have no such hierarchy, suggesting that our 6 Sources are co-equal with one another. Then again, as we all know, sometimes in life, some equal things are *more* equal than others.

In any list of any size, where all listed items are theoretically equal, we know from studying human psychology that *two* items from that list will stand out in a reader’s mind: The first and the last. This is called the “primacy effect” and “the recency effect.” Knowing that the human mind places special emphasis on the first and last within any list, good writers know to bookend their lists by putting

the most important information at the beginning *and* at the end.

And so, keeping in mind that our list of UU Sources originally contained only 5 sources, there was, most likely, an original intent to lift up for *special* recognition the first and last of that original set of Five UU Sources: Direct Experience and Reason, which correspond to the last two sides of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

So why is this important?

Because, in defining and categorizing religions, some theologians have argued that the primary difference between *conservative* religious systems and *liberal* religious systems is the emphasis a religion places on the respective sides of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. That is to say: Religions that place greater weight on the *first* two sides—Scripture and Tradition—are categorized as religiously “conservative.” In contradistinction, religions that place greater emphasis on the *last* two sides of Wesley’s Quadrilateral—Reason and Direct Experience—these religions are considered “liberal.”

So our proud identity as a *liberal* faith tradition is directly tied to the value we place on our 1st Source, and on our 5th Source.

Since we have already discussed the 1st Source earlier in this series, it behooves us *this* morning, to ask ourselves: *Where* exactly did our Unitarian Universalist emphasis on humanism come from? The answer is: mostly—but not entirely—from the Unitarian side of our family.

One *could* argue that Unitarianism, from its very early stages, was *always* predisposed toward emphasizing human affairs over those of the divine. Recall that the first Unitarians were Christians nearly 2000 years ago who denied the divinity of Jesus, choosing rather to emphasize the human-aspect of his nature. So therein lies, perhaps, the proto-humanism in our theology that would eventually blossom into the humanism we understand and embrace today.

The father of *modern* religious humanism, as we understand it today within Unitarian Universalism, was an incredibly talented and influential Unitarian minister by the name of John H. Dietrich. The Rev. Dietrich was born in 1878 and started as a minister within the Reformed tradition. He was a gifted preacher who drew hundreds and thousands of listeners whenever he spoke. He was also particularly religiously *liberal*—which is what got him in trouble within his more conservative church tradition. The Reformed Church eventually defrocked him after he refused to defend himself against allegations that he denied the virgin birth of Jesus, Jesus’ divinity, and the infallibility of the Bible.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the defrocked Rev. Dietrich got scooped up by the Unitarians.

It would be somewhat of an understatement to say that Dietrich went on to have a distinguished career as a Unitarian minister. The truth is, he became a rock-star minister who preached for hours at a time in front of sold-out theaters.

And most importantly—at least for *our* examination today—he was an ardent humanist, preaching the gospel of a new faith he called “a religion without God.”

In the early years of the 20th Century, Dietrich’s form of religious humanism found itself greatly at odds with the theology of more traditional theists, or those who believed in God and the centrality of God’s place in theology and religion. It was because of the pioneering work of many religious humanists—but *especially* because of the Rev. Dietrich—that a “humanist-theist controversy” erupted in those years and shook many faith traditions of the day, including the American Unitarians.

This controversy—as controversies often do—led to ideological polarization. Dietrich, though never explicitly denying the existence of God, took up an ardently materialist position when defending his new brand of humanism. And for several years, he staked out a position that suggested that Reason and Science were the *only* valid and reliable sources of apprehending Truth.

And thus, a form of religious humanism that was initially only meant to lift up the role of human beings (and their ability to Reason and their agency in the Universe) came to embrace *non*-theism... which then mutated into a form of explicit *anti*-theism that looked down, with condescension, upon those who still chose to cling to a belief in anything remotely supernatural. And it was this extreme, polarized humanism that won the day within many UU churches for a long time.

It was a great irony. The religious humanists, who used to be the marginalized minority, when they became the ruling majority within our faith, found ways to marginalize the theists. Many humanist UU churches excised God entirely from their sanctuaries and religious services. Overtly religious terminology—what our former UUA President, the Rev. Bill Sinkford, once called in a 2003 sermon, the “language of reverence”—such “language of reverence,” and theistically-oriented spiritual practices, were de-facto banned or censored from worship services. And what we currently recognize as our 5thSource—in point-of-fact—became the *ONLY* source of our “faith”—if anyone would even dare call it *that*—

for these congregations.

The great complaint of religious humanists *for years* was that modern religion had relied on Divine Revelation as the only pathway to all Truth of all kinds. (And by “Divine Revelation,” I mean the first two sides of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture and Tradition). Accepted as infallible, these sources of Divine Revelation were being misapplied, so as to try to explain all natural phenomena—and issues of law and morality—in a place where *Reason* would have been a more suitable tool.

(A telescope is a far better tool than the Bible to determine what lies at the center of our solar system.)

But, when religious humanists won the day in UU circles, instead of a balancing, we experienced a pendulum swing. Rather than eliminating and leveling hierarchies among our sources, Reason simply took its new place at the top, thus subjugating—if not entirely eliminating—the value and use of other sources of a more traditionally “religious” variety. The inadvertent result was that many UUs, in their hyper-humanist Unitarian Universalist Societies, suddenly found themselves bereft of language and thought-constructs to help them make sense of the deeply irrational (yet-no-less-real) aspects of our shared human experience. Like death and grief... guilt and fear... awe and wonder... grace and gratitude... hope and love.

Through this swing of the theological pendulum toward hyper-humanism, we as a people of faith had regained our mind... but we had lost our soul.

Often lost in the humanism-theism debates that continued to rage across our Association for decades was the fact that the Rev. John Dietrich—the father of modern religious humanism himself—reached this same epiphany in the last decades of his life. In the 1940s, Dietrich had essentially retired and moved to California, where he long pondered his role in the evolution of not just Unitarianism, but all Western religion. In a letter to a colleague, Dietrich wrote these words of regret: “[My] philosophy and religion have undergone considerable, if not drastic revision. I realize now how my utter reliance upon science and reason and my contempt for any intuitive insights and intangible values—which are the very essence of art and religion—was a great mistake; and the way in which I cut mankind off from all cosmic relationship was very short-sighted and arrogant.”

What Dietrich realized, I believe, is a truth that took UUism decades to learn on its own: That every one of our 6 sources, just like every side of Wesley's Quadrilateral—has its time and its place. Each has its virtues, and each has its limitations. Each source is like a tool. And tools are very useful. But problems inevitably arise when you try to use a hammer where a screwdriver is required. Our 6 Sources are a tool-belt of faith. And wisdom is knowing when to use the proper tool for the proper job. And the greatest wisdom is also knowing that no single tool can do it all.

In the end, within our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition, humanism indeed won the day. But with an important asterisk. And that footnote must read that: *“Humanism” is not synonymous with “anti-theism”; and the humanist revolution was not designed to make Reason the only source of our faith—but rather to give Reason a place at the table among equals.*

The best description I have ever read of this history and balance comes by way of our former UUA President, the Rev. Bill Schulz. In a *UU World* essay written several years ago, the Rev. Schultz writes the following:

The humanist-theist controversy has long since been over, not just within Unitarian Universalism but, indeed, the larger world. In one sense, that is because Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson are right: The basic principles of humanism have come to pervade our larger culture. In a recent pamphlet on humanism, one of its practitioners listed its basic tenets as these:

- *Showing love to all humans.*
- *Immortality is found in the examples we set and the work we do.*
- *We gain insight from many sources and all cultures. . . .*
- *We have the power within ourselves to realize the best we are capable of as human beings.*
- *We are responsible for what we do and become.*

*Of course, nothing is wrong with any of these affirmations. I agree with all of them. But I would venture to say that so do millions of other Americans, who would be shocked to learn that they are thereby considered “humanists.” I doubt if there is a single theist, Christian, or advocate of earth-centered spirituality within Unitarian Universalism today who would **not** affirm these tenets. [But most of them would ... not stop there.*

Informed by such latter-day influences as feminist theology, Zen Buddhism, deep ecology, and new models of cosmology introduced by science itself, most religious explorers today would want to go further... **use richer language...** and **wrestle with deeper questions**. And therein lies another reason the humanist-theist controversy is behind us: The religious world—and not just the Unitarian Universalist religious world—has largely said to such explorers, “Go to it.”

Amen. Blessed be. And “go to it.”