

STAR KING SCHOOL FOR THE MINISTRY

THE HUMANIST-THEIST CONTROVERSY

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST HISTORY

SKOL 4009

DECEMBER 9, 2006

SUSAN CASTEEL

# **THE HUMANIST-THEIST CONTROVERSY**

## **I. Introduction**

In this paper I will explore the Humanist-Theist controversy specifically as it affected the Unitarian Universalist movement. I will start with a brief history of the controversy and move from there to a definition of the various kinds of Humanism followed by definitions of Theism and of Deism. The two sections after those definitions will contain the Humanist arguments and the Theist arguments respectively. This will be followed by a summary of the debate sponsored by Antioch College in 1948 on whether Humanism is the religion of the future. I will end with a conclusion that will include my own observations of the controversy as it exists today.

## **II. A Historical Outline**

There are various nuances of Humanism which have changed over time, but the basic idea is the belief in the value of the human being and human achievement. During the Renaissance, most Humanists considered themselves to be Christian and they were looking for a version of Christianity that recognized human value and human dignity. One of the most famous discussions during that time was the debate between Erasmus and Martin Luther regarding predestination and free will. Luther's philosophy was that human beings have no free will in the matter of their salvation. God has already decided who will be saved and who will not. Erasmus argued that

humans do, in fact, have some say in their salvation. They have the free will to decide whether or not to seek salvation. Despite their disagreement on this point, both Erasmus and Luther were Christians - they believed in God, and they believed in Jesus Christ as their savior. The concept of Humanism changed, however, as a result of the Enlightenment and has come to include anti-Christian and even anti-religious sentiments.

Within the Unitarian movement, the great Humanist-Theist controversy took place during the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1853, the American Unitarian Association developed a “creed avowing the Executive Committee’s belief in the Divine origin, the Divine authority, and the Divine sanctions of the religion of Jesus Christ”.<sup>1</sup> This was, in part, a response to Theodore Parker’s famous address “The Transient and Permanent in Christianity” which was about the universality of religion and had resulted in quite a protest from Trinitarian ministers. However, even at the time of the American Unitarian Association’s “creed”, many of the younger ministers were beginning to follow Parker’s sentiments.

In 1865, Henry W. Bellows spearheaded the formation of the National Conference of Unitarian Churches as an effort to strengthen the organization of the Unitarian movement. The official “theology” of the National Conference was reflected in their constitution and was very definitely Christian. The First Article states in part, “Therefore, the Christian churches of the Unitarian faith here assembled

---

<sup>1</sup> David B. Parke, *The Epic of Unitarianism: Original Writings from the History of Liberal Religion* (Boston: Starr King Press, 1957), 118.

unite themselves in a common body.....to the end of reorganizing and stimulating the denomination.....to the largest exertions in the cause of Christian faith and work.”<sup>2</sup>

At the first annual meeting of the Conference the following year, the Christian position was reaffirmed. A few who attended that conference were followers of Parker and saw the debate at the conference as a “conflict between regimentation and freedom.”<sup>3</sup>

Two of those at the National Conference were Fancis Ellingwood Abbot and William J. Potter. They formed the “Free Religious Association” the following year as an attempt to organize the Humanistic response to Christianity. Abbot developed the fifty affirmations of Free Religion which included the idea of the universality of religion, much as Parker had preached. However, this was a rather short-lived movement, ending in 1893, because the members couldn’t agree on what they wanted.

On another front, the Western Conference had been formed in 1852 to support the churches west of New York. They were generally more free thinking than those in the East and in 1875 they withdrew support from the American Unitarian Association’s missionary program due to differences of opinion. The Western Conference appointed Jenkin Lloyd Jones to head up their missionary program and

---

<sup>2</sup> Parke, 121

<sup>3</sup> Parke, 122

Jones organized churches in the name of “Freedom, Fellowship, and Character in Religion”.<sup>4</sup>

There were many within the Western Conference, however, who were opposed to Jones’ methods. They felt that it sounded too much like the “Free Religious Association” and that Jones should be organizing churches in the name of Jesus Christ. This became “The Issue of the West”. One of those people who disagreed with Jones was Jabez T. Sunderland. Upon his succession of Jones as the Missionary Secretary, Sunderland put out a pamphlet describing the issue. The pamphlet was titled “Is Western Unitarianism Ready to Give Up Its Christian Character?” Sunderland explained that the leaders of the Free movement advocated that “theological Unitarianism must stand for ethical beliefs and beliefs in certain principles but not for belief in anything that will commit it to Theism or Christianity.”<sup>5</sup> He argued that by replacing Theism and Christianity with ethics, Unitarianism as a religious movement would be doomed. Sunderland’s conclusion foreshadows some of the debate that occurred later on surrounding the question about whether or not Humanism as a movement based on ethics can be considered to be a religion at all. I believe this is one of the seeds that our movement is struggling with even today. As a result of this controversy in the west, the directors of the American Unitarian Association “avowed that they would regard it as a subversion of the

---

<sup>4</sup> Parke, 125

<sup>5</sup> Parke, 127.

purpose for which its funds have been contributed...to give assistance to any church or organization which does not rest emphatically on the Christian basis.”<sup>6</sup>

At the meeting of the Western Unitarian Conference in 1887, William Channing Gannett proposed a statement entitled “Things Commonly Believed Among Us”. It was meant to be a compromise rather than a statement of required belief. As Parke explains, “Gannett had struck to the root of the controversy: neither side felt secure in its freedom. The Christians feared a conspiracy to deprive them of God and Jesus; the liberals feared every move that suggested uniformity of belief.”<sup>7</sup> Gannett’s compromise was intended to dispel those fears and there are elements of that compromise that can be seen in our current principles. Those fears, however, still exist today to some extent.

By the early 1900s, Humanism was being held up as a new world religion for modern man”<sup>8</sup>, which incorporated the scientific and anti-supernatural thinking of the time. Some of the early advocates of Humanism were the Rev. John H. Dietrich and the Rev. Curtis W. Reese both of whom began preaching Humanism in 1913. Their message was well received in the Midwest, but the East was not so quick to affirm this way of thinking. A generation-long controversy occurred and this is what is known as the “Humanist-Theist controversy”. This controversy was ushered in by

---

<sup>6</sup> Parke, 129.

<sup>7</sup> Parke, 129.

<sup>8</sup> Parke, 133.

Reese's address at the Harvard Summer School of Theology in 1920 entitled "The Content of Present-Day Religious Liberalism".

Reese continued to preach his message of Humanism and he was joined by Dietrich, who also held a series of debates with the Rev. W. L. Sullivan. They won many friends for the Humanist movement and throughout the 1920's increasing numbers of people and churches affirmed the Humanist beliefs.

At the annual meeting of the American Unitarian Association in 1934, an eight-member Commission of Appraisal was appointed to review the Unitarian movement and to make recommendations for clarification of principles and for changes in policy and organization. Out of their work came the report entitled "Unitarians Face a New Age", which in part stressed that Unitarians "will not desire to Christianize the world, because they believe that religion is deeper and more significant than any of its historic forms – even the Christian". This provided the official approval for a much broader expression of theological ideas, including Humanism, within the Unitarian movement.

### **III. What is Humanism?**

The definition of Humanism involves many different varieties. The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology defines Humanism as "any philosophy or teaching which emphasizes the worth and dignity of human beings, seeks the

welfare of the human race and rejoices in human achievements”.<sup>9</sup> This definition goes on to distinguish between Scientific Humanism, which seeks to find its values in science, and Existentialist Humanism where the most important value is freedom. Here, God is seen as an obstacle to true freedom.

Curtis Reese gives a glimpse of the trend in Humanism over time. Beginning in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, humans began to turn their attention from cosmology to the study of man. This was known as Sophist Humanism. Renaissance Humanism appeared at the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and was instrumental in bringing classical learning to light. And in the last half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Encyclopedic Humanism came along with a focus on the elimination of error and the emphasis on human aspirations.

Reese also talks about various types of Humanism, each with a different emphasis.<sup>10</sup> Philosophical Humanism places humans at the center of the knowledge process and defines values in terms of how things relate to human living. Scientific Humanism provides an investigation of cosmic behavior with the view to using it for human purpose. Educational Humanism relates the power of knowledge to the needs of human life, and Religious Humanism grounds spirituality in human living.

Thus, Humanism is “centered on the study, the worth and the enhancement of human life.”<sup>11</sup> Everything is centered on human life, human needs, and human

---

<sup>9</sup> *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (1983), s.v. “Humanism.”

<sup>10</sup> Curtis W. Reese, *Humanist Sermons* (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1927), i.

accomplishments and aspirations. Reese goes on to explain that worship is a reverential attitude towards that which is wonderful in humans and all of life.

David Parke points out that many people see the Humanist-Theist controversy as an argument over whether or not there is a God. However, even though there is no mention of God in any of the descriptions of Humanism listed above, to the Humanists, the debate was really “over evidences and merits of the natural vs. supernatural interpretations of reality.”<sup>12</sup> Charles Francis Potter claims that Humanists are really agnostics. They don’t claim that there is a God and they don’t claim that there is not a God. They just don’t know.<sup>13</sup>

## **VI. What are Theism and Deism?**

The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology defines Theism as “the doctrine that there exists a God in the sense of a being who is personal, without a body, omnipresent, perfectly free, perfectly good, omnipotent, omniscient, creator and sustainer of the universe, the proper object of human worship and obedience, eternal and necessary.”<sup>14</sup> The definition goes on to explain that to say that God is personal means that God acts intentionally to bring about purpose and change and that God has knowledge. Potter adds that the Theistic belief in God is a belief in a

---

<sup>11</sup> Reese, vi.

<sup>12</sup> Parke, 142.

<sup>13</sup> Charles F. Potter *Humanism: A New Religion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1930), 8.

<sup>14</sup> *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (1983), s.v. “Theism.”

supernatural God.<sup>15</sup> For the Theists, God knows what is going on and God intervenes in our lives.

Deism, as defined by the Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology, is “belief in the existence of a supreme being who is regarded as the ultimate source of reality and ground of value but as not intervening in natural and historical processes by way of particular providences, revelations and salvific acts.”<sup>16</sup> Here, God was responsible for getting the creation ball rolling, but does not take an active role in our affairs or daily lives. As will be seen later, some Humanists profess a belief in a God of some kind and often the roots of that belief can be traced to Deistic thinking, especially the belief in an ultimate source of reality and ground of value.

## **V. Humanistic Thinking**

Some of the Humanists viewed the Religion of Humanity to be a natural next step in the evolution of religion. E. Burdette Backus instructs us that history has shown us that “it is the fate of religion to pass through all the stages of growth from birth to maturity and death.”<sup>17</sup> He offers that Christianity will be no exception. Charles H. Lyttle adds that “the new theology of Man will outstrip the modernist Christianity of today bringing dignity and beauty to personality, elevation and

---

<sup>15</sup> Potter, 8.

<sup>16</sup> *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (1983), s.v. “Deism.”

<sup>17</sup> E. Burdette Backus, “Christianity and Humanism” in *Humanist Sermons* edited by Curtis W. Reese (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1927), 65.

delicacy to the feelings, clarity and sagacity to the mind, and to conduct, purity and compassion.”<sup>18</sup>

Potter describes the purpose of Humanism to be the study and development of man’s own personality and the search for what is available within him rather than depend on outside aid. The outside aid that Potter refers to is the supernatural. Dependence on the supernatural, according to Potter, serves to hinder man’s belief in himself. This is the “gospel of Humanism”.<sup>19</sup> Reese concurs by stating that “Humanism aims to comprehend man in his total setting; to know him as a child of the cosmos, as the individual member of the human group, and as the parent of civilizations yet to be.”<sup>20</sup> John H. Dietrich saw Unitarianism as a natural place for the growth of Humanism since Unitarianism, like Humanism, had developed a bias against the Christian concept of the depravity and worthlessness of humanity.<sup>21</sup>

One of the important aspects of Humanism is the seeking of truth based on evidence and facts. Human reflection and reason replaces divine revelation. The scientific spirit is held in reverence although it is recognized that science doesn’t know everything. Reese points out that “while science may give us inadequate

---

<sup>18</sup> Charles H. Lyttle, “Humanism and History” in *Humanist Sermons* edited by Curtis W. Reese (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1927), 26.

<sup>19</sup> Potter, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Curtis W. Reese, “The Faith of Humanism” in *Humanist Sermons* edited by Curtis W. Reese (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1927), 38.

<sup>21</sup> John H. Dietrich, “Unitarianism and Humanism” in *Humanist Sermons*, edited by Curtis W. Reese (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1927), 102.

knowledge, it gives all we have and we must make the most of it.”<sup>22</sup> We humans have the capacity to increase our understanding of the universe and of our role. “As man learns more and more about nature’s processes – both physical and psychological - he learns that human intelligence is a co-worker with nature.”<sup>23</sup> We humans have the capacity to increase our understanding of and our involvement in creation.

As far as moral life is concerned, John Haynes Holmes holds that religion is not necessary for a moral life<sup>24</sup>. Reese points out that our moral laws have not been handed down from heaven. Humans have developed the moral laws themselves and when they are out of date, we replace them with others.<sup>25</sup>

Another of the important concepts of Humanism is our relationship to society. Backus tells us that the Humanist “should feel that his every act must be in accord with the well-being of that larger life of which he is a part”.<sup>26</sup> Backus refers to Humanism as the “Religion of Humanity”. A true disciple of the Religion of Humanity is any person who works to maintain “the fabric of society and who is inspired in that work by a vision of the greater life that is yet possible for mankind.”<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Reese, *The Faith of Humanism*, 40.

<sup>23</sup> Reese, *The Faith of Humanism*, 45.

<sup>24</sup> John Haynes Holmes, “Religion: A Survey and Forecast” in *Humanist Sermons* edited by Curtis W. Reese (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1927), 8.

<sup>25</sup> Reese, *The Faith of Humanism*, 46.

<sup>26</sup> Backus, 75.

Reese says this in a little different way. He maintains that for us to be fulfilled as individuals, we must relate to others in a purposeful fashion to “weave the best personal values into a noble social order.”<sup>28</sup> Dietrich points out that there is a great responsibility connected with this way of thinking. It means that we are responsible for the miserable and undesirable conditions of the world as well as the positive aspects of our world.<sup>29</sup> If we don’t want to give a supernatural power credit for our achievements we can’t blame a supernatural power for our failures. We are completely responsible.

Humanists do experience a spiritual life and some even have a concept of God that is not the same as the historical supernatural being. The source of their spirituality is shifted to the individual and is no longer a supernatural form. It is related to the sense of being part of the larger body of humankind and of doing one’s part to facilitate progress and growth. Curtis Reese spoke about the Humanist spirituality in his address to the Harvard Summer School of Theology in 1920. He says:

“Humanistic liberalism understands spirituality to be man at his best, sane in mind, healthy in body, dynamic in personality; honestly facing the hardest facts, conquering and not fleeing from his gravest troubles; committed to the

---

<sup>27</sup> Backus, 76.

<sup>28</sup> Reese, *The Faith of Humanism*, 47.

<sup>29</sup> Dietrich, 111.

most worthwhile causes, loyal to the best ideals; ever hoping, striving, and achieving. To know one's self as inherently worthwhile, actually to find fullest expression in the widest human service and consciously to become a co-worker with cosmic process, is spiritual experience deep and abiding."<sup>30</sup>

Frederick M. Eliot believes that the thought that the Humanist can relate his/her own struggle to the "great onward sweep of human progress" offers profound inspiration.<sup>31</sup>

There were a number of different views about the concept of God among the Humanists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but none of them involve a supernatural being.

Potter offers that there is no argument that people have become conscious of being able to access some kind of power after prayer. He says that in the past, humans have attributed that power to God or some being outside of themselves. Potter holds that this is in error. He says "the fact that he (man) has attributed that access of power to a supernatural God does not prove that the strength really comes from God. It only shows that the man praying has not realized the extent of his own conscious or subconscious powers."<sup>32</sup> So according to Potter, what we may think of as God is really our own personal power.

---

<sup>30</sup> Parke, 138.

<sup>31</sup> Frederick M. Eliot, "Humanism and the Inner Life" in *Humanist Sermons* edited by Curtis W. Reese (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1927), 192.

<sup>32</sup> Potter, 17.

Reese tells us that Humanists recognize “the fact that purposive and powerful cosmic processes are operative, and that increasingly man is able to co-operate with them and in a measure control them.”<sup>33</sup> Some call this power God, others call it something else, such as the cosmic force.

Finally, E. Stanton Hodgkin gives us the following definition of God:

“The humanist is not antitheistic; to call him an atheist is most unjust and betrays the limitations of the accuser. The humanist believes in god with his whole mind and heart and soul, but it is increasingly difficult for him to write the word god with a capital letter. To him god is much more than the name of a person, as Washington, Caesar, Socrates and Jesus are names of persons. God is the reality that gives all life and phenomena its meaning and value – is the reality that stretches up to infinite heights above man and whenever we comprehend a truth or obey a noble impulse we lay hold on this reality; we rise to higher levels and experience an enlargement of moral and spiritual life. The humanist feels that man can enter into effective relations with this reality only through his relations to life and the world phenomena that impinge upon him. As to what is the ultimate form of this reality he feels that it is futile to speculate and folly to dogmatize.”<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Parke, 137.

<sup>34</sup> E. Stanton Hodgkin, “Theism and Humanism” in *Humanist Sermons* edited by Curtis W. Reese (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1927), 57.

## VI. Theistic Thinking

E. Stanton Hodgkin gives a simple summary of what the Theist believes. The Theist believes that God is a definite being and humans can have a direct personal relationship with God. Moreover, humans can receive direct help from God. This view of God is, to the Theist, the most important element in religion.<sup>35</sup>

John Dietrich provides a succinct explanation of the difference between Theism and Humanism. While Humanists put “first a study of Humans and the necessity of performing our duties toward Man” the Theist puts “first a study of God and the necessity of performing our duties toward Him.”<sup>36</sup>

George Rowland Dodson offers a more comprehensive discussion of Theistic thinking. He states that “the question of questions concerns not the existence but the nature of ultimate reality and its relation to our highest values, to all that is humanly precious. No one doubts that there is an infinite and eternal energy from which all things proceed.”<sup>37</sup> Dodson’s argument is that this ultimate reality is best symbolized as a personal or super-personal God instead of an unconscious physical force. As he explains, “the unconscious physical forces of nature are indifferent to our ideals.”<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Hodgkin, 57.

<sup>36</sup> Dietrich, 96.

<sup>37</sup> George Rowland Dodson, “The Idea of God” in *Freedom and Truth: Modern Views of Unitarian Christianity* edited by Joseph Estlin Carpenter (London: Lindsey Press, 1925), 100.

<sup>38</sup> Dodson, 101.

Dodson further elaborates by saying that we need a master life to inspire our striving and it is this master life that we mean by the word “God”.<sup>39</sup>

Sidney Herbert Mellone claims that the Fatherhood of God is essential “as a great Ideal to be realized, a task to be achieved . . . realized in personal, social, national and international life.”<sup>40</sup> And Arthur James Balfour offers that if we are to maintain the value of our highest ideals “we must find for them a congruous origin”<sup>41</sup> and God is that origin. He goes on to say, “all we think best in human culture, whether associated with beauty, goodness, or knowledge, requires God for its support. Humanism without Theism loses more than one half of its value.”<sup>42</sup>

## **VII. Is Humanism the Religion of the Future?**

In 1948, the Religion Committee at Antioch College invited Professor J. A. C. F. Auer of Harvard Divinity School and Professor Robert L. Calhoun of Yale Divinity School to debate the question “Is Humanism the Religion of the Future?” Dr. Auer argued the Humanist view and Dr. Calhoun offered the Theistic view. The summary of this debate that was published in 1951 was written by Dr. Auer, with Dr. Julian Hartt from Yale Divinity School in place of Dr. Calhoun

---

<sup>39</sup> Dodson, 117.

<sup>40</sup> Sidney Herbert Mellone, “Unitarian Christianity in the Twentieth Century” in *Freedom and Truth: Modern Views of Unitarian Christianity* edited by Joseph Estlin Carpenter (London: Lindsey Press, 1925), 56.

<sup>41</sup> Balfour, 249.

<sup>42</sup> Balfour, 248.

Dr. Auer says that Humanism does not claim to have all of the answers. However, Humanism does require that proper methods be used to find answers if there are answers to be found. In contrast, Theism does claim to have all of the answers.

According to Dr. Auer, Theism starts with the belief in God as a given with no adequate proof that God really does exist. Humanists, on the other hand, believe in God only after finding the adequate evidence. One can turn this argument around though and say that Humanism starts with a disbelief in God as a given with no adequate proof that God really does not exist. This point is part of the counter argument offered by Hartt.

Theism holds that humans get their significance from God, while Humanism believes that humans get their significance from themselves. “We should reason from human life to the universe, not from the universe to a human life.”<sup>43</sup> Dr. Auer contrasts the average Theistic sermon with an average Humanistic sermon.

“The average theistic sermon is sure to contain a warning to the hearers that they are weak, prone to evil and unable to overcome their weakness and sin by relying upon their own power. They must place their trust in God and pray

---

<sup>43</sup> J.A.C. F. Auer and Julian Hartt, *Humanism versus Theism* (The Antioch Press Company, 1951), 4.

that He may help them out of their present unsatisfactory condition. The source of strength is in God and not in man.”<sup>44</sup>

“The average humanistic sermon reminds men of the fact that they are potentially good. They are equipped with the qualities needed to deal with the problems they are likely to encounter. They are urged to rely upon their inward strength. They have the moral obligation to use the qualities which they possess for their own sake and for the sake of others. If they don’t they are guilty of selfishness, which is the main sin.”<sup>45</sup>

In arguing the Theist viewpoint, Dr. Auer states that the primary object of religion is “integration of man” so that man is inwardly whole. He claims that Humanism and Theism are in agreement on this point but that they disagree on how this integration is to be achieved. The Theist believes that this integration comes from God, from a source outside of man. Humanism, on the other hand, does not believe that this integration can or should be brought about by an outside force. Humans work to achieve it themselves and they realize that it will never be complete.

Dr. Hartt explains that the disagreement between Humanism and Theism is not about facts. Rather, it is about a difference in “theories concerning the nature of

---

<sup>44</sup> Auer and Hartt, 51.

<sup>45</sup> Auer and Hartt, 52.

the world as a whole and of man's place in it."<sup>46</sup> While both theories cannot be right, we must understand that it is possible that neither theory is right – perhaps both are wrong.

Dr. Hartt suggests that the Humanists must play by the same rules in this debate as the Theists. If the Humanists say that there is no God, they must be able to provide evidence to support that position just as they expect the Theists to provide evidence to support their position that there is a God. Also, bringing up “all the private and public mischief religion has worked”<sup>47</sup> will neither prove that the Theistic theory is wrong, nor will it prove that the Humanist theory is right. “Just as the theist cannot rightly appeal to the supernatural wisdom imbedded in the traditions of the Church, so the humanist cannot rightly appeal to what every right-thinking modern person knows.”<sup>48</sup>

Dr. Hartt explains that the general Theistic definition of God is that “God is that being than which nothing greater can be conceived.”<sup>49</sup> Thus, God is absolute and perfect. Theism is the theory that the world, including man, is the product of God's activity. God “governs and directs the world for the realization of the greatest ultimate good.”<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> Auer and Hartt, 81.

<sup>47</sup> Auer and Hartt, 86

<sup>48</sup> Auer and Hartt, 86

<sup>49</sup> Auer and Hartt, 87.

The main point of Dr. Hartt's argument is that Humanism is not really a religion. This is because Humanism is not willing to apply any significance to the metaphysical questions. Humanism is just an ethic that addresses human values. "Ethics is part of religion, but not the whole of it."<sup>51</sup> Dr. Hartt elaborates on his criticism of Humanism with the following points.<sup>52</sup>

1. Its ethics are divorced from cosmology. It does not offer a clear picture of where humans stand in the whole picture of things. Instead, humans are of the ultimate significance.

2. There is no mystery that encourages the use of ritual music, dance, poetry, etc. "It affords inadequate scope for the play of imagination in aesthetic, moral, and speculative interests.

3. It "strikes for a minimum settlement rather than for the maximum."

Humanists focus on learning to accept what we have to do without and they don't have any necessary truths to rely on.

Dr. Hartt summarizes by saying that "adopting the course of humanism will be part of a comprehensive process of the dehumanization of humanity."<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Auer and Hartt, 82.

<sup>51</sup> Auer and Hartt, 83.

<sup>52</sup> Auer and Hart, 147.

<sup>53</sup> Auer and Hartt, 147.

## VIII. Conclusion

It appears that the Humanist-Theist controversy can be boiled down to just a few specific points and this controversy seems to be active to some extent even today.

The first point is the “God or no-God” argument. What this really means, though, is the belief or disbelief in a supernatural, personal God who intervenes in our lives. As we have seen above, some Humanists believe in a God that is defined as something other than a supernatural being. The problem is with the word “God”. Within the Unitarian Universalist movement of today, that word can mean different things to different people. It would be nice if we could come up with a different word that didn’t have all of the baggage that “God” does, but it is highly unlikely that there would ever be agreement on another word. Instead we must realize that the word “God” is a symbol and we should not assume that we know what the other person is saying when he/she speaks of God. Rather, we can listen to someone else talk about God and bring in our own personal meaning of the word. If one person thinks of God in symbolic terms and another thinks of God in a more literal sense, each can still find his/her own meaning in worship or ritual. It doesn’t matter that they don’t agree on how to think about God. Sidney Mellone speaks of religious symbols. He says that “religious experience is and must be essentially symbolic”<sup>54</sup> He goes on to say that “a religious symbol is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.”<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Mellone, 68.

<sup>55</sup> Mellone, 69.

Conflict arises when we try to describe this inner experience in language because language is inadequate to the task. That is why we need symbols.

It is important to keep the word “God” in our vocabulary – to keep it as one of our symbols. We need to take seriously Bill Sinkford’s suggestion that we develop a more religious language. This is not just a “nice to have”. It can have serious implications in our ability to work with other Christian denominations and other God-based faiths in the fight for social justice. Having a vocabulary that uses the same words as other faiths makes it easier for them to accept and relate to us. It is not necessary to get into theological discussions that may lead to disagreement when what we’re really trying to do is address social issues. If we have a foreign vocabulary and refuse to use or acknowledge the word “God”, we are inviting those types of contentious theological discussions. That will just get in the way of, and perhaps sabotage, the real and very important work that we are trying to accomplish - the creation of a just and peaceful world.

The other point that I would like to make about the controversy is the question about whether or not Humanism is really a religion. That, of course, requires that we define what we mean by “religion”. As is seen above, Dr. Hartt does not consider Humanism to be a religion. Humanism is an ethic which is just one part of religion. But there are Humanists who do consider Humanism to be a religion.

Potter describes religion as an “attempt to unify one’s personality and relate it to the world without.”<sup>56</sup> And Eliot says that the value of a religion is related to the effect that it has on a person’s inner life. “Does his religion tend to build up that mysterious, indefinable but nevertheless intensely real thing we call his soul? Does his religion make a man more of a person, more worthy to be called a man, more truly human?”<sup>57</sup> Eliot holds that the answers to these questions are more important than the test of intellectual correctness. He explains that “it is possible to get real humanizing values out of a faith that is intellectually discredited, and it is equally possible to have a faith which is thoroughly in line with the best modern thought and yet find that it does not make any appreciable difference in the strength of one’s inner life.”<sup>58</sup>

Perhaps this is a good working definition of the word “religion” for our purposes. A religion is that which strengthens one’s inner life, that which enhances humanizing values, or that which builds up the soul. There is no need to believe in a God with this definition. Yet, there is also room for a belief in God.

If we Unitarian Universalists want to be known as a religious movement and not just another social club, then perhaps we should think about what it is that makes us a religious movement. Religion is more than just intellectual activity. It should involve the whole person – the heart as well as the head. I think that ideally, that is

---

<sup>56</sup> Potter, 6.

<sup>57</sup> Eliot, 185.

<sup>58</sup> Eliot, 185.

what Humanism is getting at – how to become a “whole” person and realize our whole potential. And those who believe in God, at least those in the UU movement, want that as well. We all have that in common.

Humanists have the right not to believe in God and to express that belief. But others have an equal right to express their belief in a God. Neither group should become defensive and try to deny the other their right to express their belief. If we truly listen to the other – and listen for understanding - we might discover something new – about ourselves, about the other person and/or about the world. If we can do that, there is no need to have a “winner” in the Humanist-Theist controversy. We will all be winners.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Auer, J.A.C Fagginger and Julian Hartt. *Humanism versus Theism*. The Antioch Press Company, 1951.
- Backus, E. Burdette. "Christianity and Humanism." In *Humanist Sermons*, edited by Curtis W. Reese, 65-76. Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1927.
- Balfour, Arthur James. *Theism and Humanism*. New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915.
- Carpenter, Joseph Estlin., ed. *Freedom and Truth: Modern Views of Unitarian Christianity*. London: Lindsey Press, 1925.
- Cragg, Gerald R. "Deism." In *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*. Edited by Alan Richardson and John Bowden, 148-149. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983.
- Dietrich, John H. "Unitarianism and Humanism." In *Humanist Sermons*, edited by Curtis W. Reese, 95-113. Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1927.
- Dodson, George Rowland. "The Idea of God." In *Freedom and Truth: Modern Views of Unitarian Christianity*, edited by Joseph Estlin Carpenter, 87-128. London: Lindsey Press, 1925.
- Eliot, Frederick M. "Humanism and the Inner Life." In *Humanist Sermons*, edited by Curtis W. Reese, 185-193. Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1927.
- Hodgin, E. Stanton. "Theism and Humanism." In *Humanist Sermons*, edited by Curtis W. Reese, 51-61. Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1927.
- Holmes, John Haynes. "Religion: A Survey and Forecast." In *Humanist Sermons*, edited by Curtis W. Reese, 3-20. Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1927.
- Lyttle, Charles H. "Humanism and History." In *Humanist Sermons*, edited by Curtis W. Reese, 23-35. Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1927.
- Mellone, Sidney Herbert. "Unitarian Christianity in the Twentieth Century." In *Freedom and Truth: Modern Views of Unitarian Christianity*, edited by Joseph Estlin Carpenter, 43-84. London: Lindsey Press, 1925.

- Moltmann, Jurgen. "Humanism." In *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*. Edited by Alan Richardson and John Bowden, 271-272. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983.
- Parke, David B. *The Epic of Unitarianism: Original Writings from the History of Liberal Religion*. Boston: Starr King Press, 1957.
- Potter, Charles Francis. *Humanism: A New Religion*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1930.
- Reese, Curtis W., ed. *Humanist Sermons*. Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1927.
- Reese, Curtis W.. "The Faith of Humanism." In *Humanist Sermons*, edited by Curtis W. Reese, 39-48. Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1927.
- Swinburne, Richard. "Theism." In *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*. Edited by Alan Richardson and John Bowden, 562-563. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983.