

## Language of Reverence: A Response

*Rev. Bill Sinkford*

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The firestorm of reaction to the misquote of my sermon in Ft. Worth has subsided. Now many congregations are actively engaged in conversation about our religious language and, more importantly, about the realities of the spiritual journeys of individual Unitarian Universalists. The encouragement of those conversations was my genuine hope. In the past months, I've had the opportunity to communicate with literally thousands of Unitarian Universalists and I have learned much.

The most important learning is that our faith community is ready for, even yearning for this conversation. It is, of course, not a surprise that those congregants who crave more "spiritual" worship have been energized. More of a surprise was the response from those "new" Unitarian Universalists from an unchurched background. They have been eager, almost hungry to engage with this conversation and the invitation to share their spiritual journeys. But perhaps most surprising has been the response of those who name themselves "Humanists." It is from persons with that identity that I have received the most correspondence, first in anger, but now frequently with open minds and tender hearts.

I've also learned that the language which would pit the "Humanists" against those desiring "Greater Spirituality" is truly unhelpful. To frame this conversation as a process which will separate the sheep from the goats, the right from the wrong invites argument and debate, but not discernment, reflection and learning. The reality is that, in the broad definition, every Unitarian Universalist is a humanist. We know there are no other hands on earth but ours. We know from all of our work as a faith community on oppressions of various kinds about the dangers of thinking in categories. It is not that categories have no reality or place



in our analysis. I would be the last to argue that case. But placing persons in categories obscures the reality of individual lived experience.

I know that many, perhaps most of those who will read these words are ministers and religious professionals. I want to say to my colleagues that there are genuine pastoral issues involved in conversation on these matters with those who claim a “Humanist” identity. These persons often feel that even opening this conversation threatens them with the loss of their church. Many of these persons have come to tolerate, or even find satisfaction.

I’ve learned that the response to Unitarian Universalist “Humanists” needs to begin with gratitude. These persons supported our congregations and institutions for decades. Without their faithful support there almost literally would not be a Unitarian Universalism today, or at least not one that we would recognize. It is also critical to affirm that there will always be a place in our faith for persons who name themselves “Humanist.” The great virtue and value of our faith is its ability to live as a religiously pluralistic faith, where our religious differences are seen as blessings rather than as curses. We live that reality imperfectly to be sure, but we hold fast to that vision. This is one of the great gifts we offer to our wounded world.

These first thoughts are, as I read them, quite institutional rather than theological. Not surprising, I suppose, as I was elected to be an institutional shepherd. But let me offer at least a few initial words of a more theological nature.

There are, for me, at least two important threads woven into the fabric of this conversation. One is whether we can name the holy, can we speak of that which transcends our ego and which calls us to the making of justice? Can we speak about God? But there is a second thread. Can we engage with the Judeo-Christian tradition? Can we reflect on those stories, using them to help us grow our souls, just as we reflect on stories from every other faith tradition on the planet? Or, because they carry too much emotional baggage, must we avoid the challenge and the wisdom of the tradition out of which we grew? I believe that both of these threads of conversation need to be a part of our dialogue.

Rebecca, you offered me the opportunity to ask you a question. What would Unitarian Universalism miss, what spiritual issues would we fail to address if we elected to avoid the Judeo-Christian tradition on our spiritual journey?

*Watch for Dr. Parker’s response to Rev. Sinkford in this continuing dialogue.*

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