

# *Reason and Reverence: A New Religious Humanism*

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The red knot is a sandpiper that every year travels more than 18,000 miles from the arctic islands of northern Canada to Tierra del Fuego, at the southern tip of South America and back again stopping along the way on several Atlantic beaches. During their stay in the southern hemisphere they replace their tattered feathers in a long molt ensuring their flight equipment to be in top condition when, in February, they begin their journey north in flocks of hundreds or thousands. They stop on their way for food, always at the same beaches or marshes where they have fed for centuries. From the northern coast of South America they embark on a week long non-stop flight that takes them to Delaware Bay just as horseshoe crabs are laying eggs by the millions. There they gorge themselves in order to be prepared to engage in the next leg of their long journey – non-stop to the islands north of Hudson Bay. There in the long summer they mate and breed. By mid-July the female knots abandon their offspring and head south and a few weeks later the males follow. The babies fend for themselves until late August when they too commence their 9,000 mile journey.

Now here is the amazing thing: the young red knots by the thousands and without adult guides or prior experience find their way along the very same migration route of their parents, stop at precisely the same beaches and marshes for food and join the others at precisely the same place in Tierra del Fuego. (from *Skeptics and True Believers*, by Chet Raymo, pp. 20-22)

How do they do it? How do they know where to go along a route they have never traveled to a destination where they have never been? Scientists can only surmise that the red knot's genetic inheritance includes a map for the journey and the instrumental knowledge to follow it, but saying that is simply to emphasize both mystery and the amazing nature of life.

Love of nature and feelings of reverence and amazement toward it is a long tradition in America, beginning in particular with Ralph Waldo Emerson whose first major publication was his great essay on "Nature." Early in the essay he writes:

"If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile.

"The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible, but all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence."

Like Emerson I love to go outside on a clear night and gaze at the sky glittering with the lights of thousands of stars most of them larger than our sun, and as I ponder the unimaginable vastness of what I am seeing and the incredible distances between the stars

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<sup>1</sup> The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker's presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

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I am overcome with awe and amazement and with a sense of how tiny the earth is and how infinitesimally small am I, and I am cleansed of pride and arrogance.

In recent years a religious perspective called religious naturalism has been experiencing a revival. Religious naturalism says two things. First, it holds that the natural universe is all there is. The supernatural does not exist. Second, it maintains that there is religious meaning and value in nature.

What I have done in a book published recently (entitled *Reason and Reverence: Religious Humanism for the 21st Century*) is to combine humanism and religious naturalism into what I call “humanistic religious naturalism.” Humanism has of course always been naturalistic in the sense that it denies the existence of a supernatural realm, but until now it has not emphasized the religious or spiritual aspects of naturalism.

Before I go on let me say what I mean by religious. Most people think religion or religious refers to belief in a supernatural being. That’s not what I mean. I use the word religious to refer to those experiences that give direction and meaning to a person’s life, experiences that help to unify the self.

When I talk about religious naturalism or religious humanism I mean religious in the sense John Dewey wrote about in his book *A Common Faith*. There he distinguished between religion and the religious impulse or religious experience. Religion, to him, referred to belief in the supernatural and to the institutions of religion with their creeds and rituals. The adjective religious, on the other hand, refers to devotion to an ideal that helps to unify the self, composing and harmonizing the various elements of our being. Religion too often does not do that, but things that have nothing to do with organized supernatural religion can and often do.

Listening to Handel’s “Messiah” is not necessarily religious, but listening to a Beethoven symphony may be. Going to a religious service may not be but walking in the woods may be. The religious dimension is not a separate compartment of our lives but a quality of life and that which gives meaning and direction to our lives.

Both religious humanism and religious naturalism maintain that human beings are products of nature and natural causes. We are one hundred percent physical beings. We are biochemical machines if you will. We are simply one of a prolific nature’s multitudinous creations, each unique and special, and all part of one interdependent web. We have no immortal soul dwelling within our physical bodies as western religion and philosophy have taught for over 2,000 years. What we call the mind or soul or spirit is simply the functioning of the trillions of cells in our brain, probably the most complex organism yet developed by evolution.

Humanistic religious naturalism does not believe that there is life after death. We live on in the memory of those who loved us and whose lives we touched, and we live on in the form of our contributions to making the world a better place. We can be sure of only one life. This acceptance of human mortality and transience leads humanists and naturalists to feel gratitude for life and a commitment to make the one life we have as meaningful and as joyful as possible.

Religious humanism and religious naturalism go together very well because from humanism comes the emphatic conviction of the value of every human being, a belief in the worth and dignity of human beings, and an ethic that emphasizes love and social justice and opposes oppression in all its forms.

From naturalism comes a sense of awe and wonder and reverence and mystery in the face of life and the universe that provides a deep spiritual dimension that humanism by itself lacks.

Moreover, humanism has been accused of being too human centered and needed a deeper, more inclusive foundation which naturalism provides. And, humanism has been accused of being too cold and rationalistic, and that too is remedied by naturalism. Every religious perspective needs a story, and religious naturalism gives us a meaningful story, the epic of cosmic and biological evolution. Thus religious naturalism provides a foundation for a new, more open and inclusive humanism. In a word, humanism provides the humanistic values that naturalism lacks and religious naturalism provides the religious and spiritual aspect that humanism has lacked.

Religious naturalism not only insists that the natural universe is ultimate. It also finds religious meaning in nature. For many people, myself included, nature evokes some of the same feelings a supernatural deity evokes in the adherents of traditional religion. The unimaginable vastness of the universe and the incredible complexity of life evoke awe and reverence greater than anything I experienced as a theist. As a religious naturalist, I feel wonder and amazement at nature's majesty, beauty, complexity and power; I feel joy and comfort among its trees or by its waters and refreshed and rejuvenated from walking in its woods; I feel reverence when I ponder the incomprehensible vastness of the universe and the equally mind-boggling smallness of the sub-microscopic world. That the universe is, in the title of a book by physicist Freeman Dyson, "infinite in all directions" is beyond my ability to imagine. I find that the more I learn about the world from modern science, the more I am in awe. That the star Arcturus that I can see in the night sky is 216 trillion miles away absolutely boggles my mind; that other stars I can see with the naked eye are as far away as 10,000 light years leaves me speechless; that the DNA in a single cell in my body that is so small I cannot see it, if stretched out would reach from fingertip to fingertip of my outstretched arms and that there are trillions of cells in my body and that there is enough DNA in those cells to reach to the sun and back a dozen times, these facts fill me with wonder and astonishment. And the fact that the Milky Way Galaxy has a trillion stars and that the universe contains at least 50 billion galaxies and thus thousands of trillions of stars similar to our sun fills me with an amazement far beyond my poor power to describe. I am overcome with astonishment at the thought that my body consists of 10 trillion cells and that my brain contains about 100 billion neurons and 100 trillion synapses. Even the immense power of nature as exemplified in earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis and tornadoes is a source of awe. That nature's power can destroy human beings and human creations is reason for great sorrow, but it is not the result of malice, and certainly not "the will of God" as is sometimes said. We can use our ingenuity and creativity to do all we can to protect ourselves from nature's destructive power, but we will never be entirely successful. Nature is like the Hindu godhead that consists of the creator (Brahma), the preserver (Vishnu) and the destroyer (Shiva).

For religious naturalists living in a natural environment is a spiritual experience. Freed from supernaturalism the religious naturalist can be devoted to a nature that nurtures and sustains. It is not incidental that people speak of "mother earth" or "our mother the earth." Our ties to nature are deep and intimate.

One of the values of religious naturalism is its emphasis on the environment. Religious naturalism has a strong environmental ethic not only because of what environmental pollution and global warming will do to human beings but also because of the intrinsic value of nature.

Religious humanism affirms the inherent value of every human being; it maintains that all persons are ends in themselves and not means to another's ends. It holds that we humans make our lives meaningful through service and through personal and spiritual growth and by optimizing the good and opposing that which is evil. It emphasizes personal freedom and the application of critical thinking and natural intelligence in making choices and guiding one's actions. It emphasizes life in the here and now and does not expect another life after death. It upholds intellectual honesty and rejects superstition. Since it denies the supernatural, it insists that we can rely only on ourselves to establish a better world. It is optimistic about the future although this optimism is tempered by its understanding that humans too often pursue their own interests at the expense of the common good. And it finds great value in human beings coming together in religious and ethical communities to deepen their understanding, support and strengthen their values, celebrate life's passages and work together for a better world.

But religious humanism has been criticized for being too human-centered, overly rationalistic and lacking in spirituality. However, by combining humanism with religious naturalism these problems disappear.

Those who accuse humanism of being too human-centered claim that for humanism human beings are ultimate. But naturalism provides a foundation for humanism that is far greater than humankind. For humanistic religious naturalism the natural universe, the cosmos, and not human beings, is what is ultimate. It is the source of life, that in which we live and move and have our being.

These same critics say that religious humanists are not really religious because they have no interest in or basis for spirituality. But that criticism does not stick in the case of humanistic religious naturalism where our relationship with nature is the source of a deep and vital spiritual experience including feelings of awe and reverence and humility in the context of this extraordinary universe.

Moreover, we humanists have been criticized for being too rational to the exclusion of our feelings. We are said to be all head and no heart. But there is nothing inherent in humanism that says we have to ignore our emotions. In fact our reason and our emotions often work together. In her important book, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, University of Chicago scholar Martha Nussbaum makes a convincing argument that emotions pervade the way we think and that they are part of what makes us human. In Nussbaum's view, reason and emotions are not entirely separate; rather, our mind consists of both rationality and affect. For example, I feel outrage at injustice and oppression. I get angry when I think of the millions of people without health insurance, of the debilitating effects of racism in this country, or the injuries of poverty in the richest country in the world. Every humanist I know feels the same way, and we use our reason to try to resolve these problems. Our reasoning processes are permeated with our feelings. Our head and our heart work together.

The criticisms that have been leveled against religious humanism do not apply to a humanism that is anchored in religious naturalism.

Every religious vision needs sacred stories, and humanistic religious naturalism has two stories, one from its humanist side and one from its naturalist perspective.

The sacred story for the religious humanist is the story of the long struggle of the human race for freedom – the story of the struggle for political as well as religious freedom. It is the story of the struggle to abolish slavery in the ancient as well as in the

modern world. It is the story of the Hebrew prophets who sought to transform Judaism from a religion of laws and rituals to an ethical faith. It is the story of Jesus who sought to free Judaism from being a religion of laws and rituals and to make it a religion of the heart. It is the story of the Protestant Reformation which sought to free religion from priestly and ecclesiastical authority. It is the story of the Buddha's reform of Hinduism and of liberalizing movements in Islam. It is the story of Felix Adler and Robert G. Ingersoll, Ernestine L. Rose and Elizabeth Cady Stanton and John Dewey and of all those who have sought to purge religion from supernaturalism and authoritarianism and who have fought for greater political freedom over the ages. It is the story of the liberation of the mind from superstition and from religious dogmas that foster bigotry and hate. It is the story of the men and women who have worked for equal rights for people of color and for women and for people of all sexual orientations. The humanist story is the story of all those who have worked to make human life more truly free and therefore more fully human. And it is a story without an ending as long as there are people who are not free either because of political tyranny or because of poverty and ignorance and superstition and every other form of oppression. It is a story you and I can not only tell but a story we can continue to make.

Every religious vision also needs a story that provides an account of how the world came into being, the place of human beings, and the meaning and direction of life, especially human life. The traditional stories that have sustained western culture for several millennia are no longer efficacious, but modern science has given us a new story with multiple layers of rich meaning. That story is the epic of cosmic and biological evolution.

That story is a religious story because it calls us out of our little self-centered worlds and enables us to see ourselves as part of the great living system we call the cosmos. This story gives a larger meaning and a broader ethic to our lives.

The epic of cosmic and biological evolution is the narrative that underlies humanistic religious naturalism and that provides the individual with a meaningful worldview and a sense of belonging to a larger process. The epic of cosmic evolution that begins with the big bang provides us with a vision of the universe as a single reality, one long spectacular process of change and development, an unfolding drama, a universal story for humankind – our story. Like no other story it humbles us as we contemplate the complexity of the cosmic process, and it amazes us when we try to imagine its magnitude. Like no other story it evokes reverence as we feel its power, and awe and wonder as we visualize its beauty. Like no other story it gives us a scientifically based cosmology that tells us how we came to be and what we are made of. “The basic elements of our bodies – carbon, calcium, iron – were forged inside supernovas, dying stars, and are billions of years old. We are, in fact, made of stardust. We are intimately related to the universe.” Like no other story it teaches us that we are all members of one family sharing the same genetic code and a similar history, and it evokes gratitude and astonishment at the gift of life itself and inspiration for responsible living. Like no other story it gives meaning and purpose to human beings as the agents responsible for the current and future stage of evolution, psycho-social evolution.

The epic of evolution is “everybody’s story,” but it is uniquely the story the religious naturalist claims. It is a story with a scientifically based worldview and values that are both scientific and morally relevant to the human situation. It is a story of the creative powers of matter-energy and of the changing and adaptive powers of living cells. It is a story of the growth and transformation of living beings. It is our sacred story.

## **Spirituality**

About 25 or 30 years ago some people in the congregation I was serving began to talk about spirituality and spiritual growth. As a humanist I was reluctant to adopt the emphasis on spirituality in part because it has connotations of supernaturalism. But it need not. Spirituality can have meanings that we humanists can affirm. In fact spirituality is already part of our lives.

To me spirituality refers to that dimension of our lives that deals with values, truth, meaning, integrity, joy, happiness, in a word, with how and why we live. It refers to the quality of our lives in the here and now.

The word spirit comes from the Latin word spiritus, meaning breath, so spirituality is the breath of life, what makes life vital, that which gives us something to live for, that which deepens and broadens our lives and makes us truly human. Compassion and caring for others is a true measure of spirituality.

Parker Palmer has defined spirituality as the eternal human longing to be part of something greater than our own egos. For humanists that means being part of a cause or an institution that is larger than ourselves and that is dedicated to making the world a better place. That cause could be humanism itself, or freedom, or social justice or a number of other possibilities.

One of my former students suggested that to her spirituality meant love of the universe. To me that means experiencing the sense of reverence, awe, and wonder at this incredible universe in which we live. It also means love of life and gratitude for one's time on this beautiful earth. Carl Sagan wrote: "When we recognize our place in an immensity of light years and in the passage of ages, when we grasp the intricacy, beauty and subtlety of life, then that soaring feeling, that sense of elation and humility combined, is surely spiritual."

## **Ethics**

A few years ago an old friend visited the congregation I was serving and heard a social justice sermon. Afterward she asked, "But without God what is your foundation for ethics and morality? Why a concern for justice? Why be good at all?"

The idea that ethical living depends on belief in God and following his commands permeates our society. That idea is based on the assumption that religion must be the basis of morality. That assumption is not true either historically, logically or empirically. From a historical point of view you can find high moral teachings in non-theistic cultures. For example, Confucius taught a version of the golden rule 400 years before the common era, and you will also find versions of the golden rule in pre-Christian Greece and Rome and India.

You can also demonstrate empirically that theism is not necessary to moral living. Psychologist David Wulff has shown that there is a consistent correlation between religious affiliation and attitudes of intolerance and prejudice. You don't exactly need a study to show that in America religion is often identified with bigotry and hate. On the other hand, I think of many humanists who have contributed significantly to human betterment. Religious humanism affirms that ethical and moral principles are created by human beings. They are not derived from a source outside humankind.

The process of moral evolution began in our animal background. Scientists have identified numerous premoral feelings and behaviors in our evolutionary ancestors. Apes, monkeys, dolphins, and whales exhibit cooperation, mutual aid, altruism,

sympathy, peacemaking, and community concern. Chimpanzees, for example, have been observed to participate in food-sharing, thus exhibiting cooperation and altruism. Dolphins have been seen pushing sick or wounded members of a pod to the surface so they can catch their breath.

These premoral feelings and behaviors are part of our evolutionary heritage as humans. The next step in the process of moral development occurred as humans began to live together in societies. It became apparent that unless each person's life was protected, no one would be safe. Thus the basic human instinct for self-preservation gave rise to the prohibition against murder, first in the family, tribe, or clan. As understanding grew, this basic prohibition against taking life expanded to include progressively larger groups—clusters of tribes, nations. Finally, at its highest point of development, it evolved into the principle of respect for all human life. "Morality begins with the awareness of the sanctity of one's life, hence the lives of others." (Bernard Malamud)

In the same way, it is easy to see how the need for trust and reliability in relationships led to such moral values as the prohibition against stealing and the importance of telling the truth and keeping promises. Through thousands of generations, these moral precepts have been expanded and modified to include other moral values. Charles Darwin put it this way: "Any animal whatever, endowed with well-marked social instincts, the parental and filial affections being here included, would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience, as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well, or nearly as well developed, as in man."

In a word, moral precepts developed over thousands of generations in human societies without a religious basis. Religion came later.

Evolutionary psychology is adding to our knowledge of how evolution has wired our minds with moral precepts. E.O. Wilson believes, for example, that cooperativeness and empathy which are the bases of much of our moral behavior, are inherited because people who cooperate tend to live longer and produce more offspring. Thus genes predisposing people toward cooperative behavior would have come to predominate in the human population as a whole.

Recent brain research has shown that generosity and altruism activate a primitive part of the brain that is also activated in response to food or sex. The result is a feeling of pleasure and satisfaction. Giving is pleasurable; our brains are wired to enjoy altruism. Jesus' teaches that it is more blessed to give than to receive is corroborated by neuroscience.

The late Unitarian minister John Ruskin Clark wrote these words which sum up the humanist position on this issue: "Norms of good and evil, of right and wrong, did not spring full-blown from somebody's head; they developed slowly over generations of trial and error; It is part of the mark of being human that we benefit from the experience of others; To recognize that concepts of good and evil are derived from human experience is to give them a timeless validity... The realization that morals are empirically grounded does not invalidate traditional norms; it greatly reinforces them."

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I believe that any religious perspective that is truly relevant to the 21<sup>st</sup> century must have at least these characteristics.

First, it must affirm that human beings are an integral part of nature. We are not separate and distinct from the rest of the natural world; we are part and parcel of it. We

are related to every living creature, both plant and animal. The elements of which we are composed – carbon, calcium, iron – are the same elements of which the rest of the universe is made. We are not dominant over nature as once we believed but are its stewards and trustees.

Second, therefore any religion for today's world will affirm humankind's responsibility to preserve and sustain the natural world. The future of life on this planet and indeed the survival of the planet itself depends on it.

Third, any viable contemporary religion must take seriously the implications for religion of the remarkable discoveries of the modern natural and human sciences. The religion of the future should be a religion that learns from science and adapts its teachings accordingly.

Fourth, such a religion will recognize the importance of both reason and reverence. The human ability to think critically and constructively has made possible our many artistic achievements and medical and technological advances, but it is only reverence, understood as feelings of respect and awe, that can save us from the hubris that would destroy all the good we have accomplished. As Paul Woodruff writes in his elegant little book, *Reverence*: "Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations." And it is reverence that keeps human beings from acting like gods. It is thus essential to our true humanity.

Finally, the religion of the future must affirm those values that help to make our lives more fully human. Becoming more fully human involves the transformation of the mind and heart from self-centeredness to a sense of one's self as part of a larger sacred whole and to a deep commitment to the human and natural worlds. It is about transformation from a shallow life of fear, greed, hedonism, and materialism to a meaningful life of love and caring, gratitude and generosity, fairness and equity, joy and hope and a profound respect for others.

The grounding of religious humanism in religious naturalism makes it possible to affirm a perspective that includes these five characteristics and thus qualifies as a religion for the 21st century.

Let me close with these words from Carl Sagan: "**A religion that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later, such a religion will emerge.**" I believe it is emerging among religious liberals today.

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