

THROUGH THE WORLD TO THE SACRED

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This morning's sermon will attempt to weave together pieces of my spiritual autobiography and a development of or argument for my current faith. The principal signposts for this development will be, first, secular and then religious humanism; second, a metaphorical understanding and application of basic Christian theology; and third, my current conviction that life and the universe are sacred, in and of themselves and not because some Divine Power created them. In fact, I shall argue that the words "sacred" and "holy", not only do not depend on God, but are concepts in fact more basic than that of "God".¹

¹ If not at the beginning, then certainly by the end, of this talk, many of you will be asking for my credentials! What makes this bearded chap think he has anything to teach us and the right to adumbrate on so many deep and weighty subjects? He can think what he likes, but why take up our time here to present what are essentially subjective ideas? I have no irrefutable answer to this suspicion, though I hope the talk as a whole will argue for itself. But I think the following background information may ameliorate some fears. First, I have been a Universalist and then a Unitarian since the age of ten and diligently followed for four years the magnificent R.E. curriculum of Sophia Lyon Fahs. At the age of sixteen, I was proud to be the tenth member necessary for the legal creation of a Unitarian Fellowship in Saskatoon, and from that time to the present, I have prepared and presented an average of at least one sermon every two years and in three different countries. Second, while always remaining a UU, I have worshipped in churches of five different denominations or religions during extended periods in my life, not to mention the merely occasional attendance (at least for weddings and funerals) of several others. (These religious homes have been the United Church of Canada, the Church of England in both England and France, French Calvinism, and Mennonite Brethren, all balanced and complicated by a continuous adherence to UU theology.) Once I got over the fear that the God in whom I did not believe would strike me dead if I orally consumed His Son's body and blood, I have willingly shared in communion at several churches out of solidarity with my hosts or a sense of

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The humanist phase came first and remains basic. My parents both left Protestantism as a result of meeting Darwin's theory of evolution in a university biology class; unfortunately, it took them another fifteen years to find UUism. My first R.E. experience was a grade-four text entitled How Miracles Abound; our teachers were scientists, doctors and engineers, and we looked through microscopes and telescopes, studied stones and crystals, and on blotters planted watercress that germinated in just one week. Our minister in Minnesota had moved from the Department of Philosophy at Tufts University (near Boston) to a Universalist pulpit. Although a man of great personal warmth and strong, progressive political views, he seemed more comfortable presenting rational, factual argument than any spiritual dimension of faith. On the other hand, the church had a brilliant organist/composer and regularly delivered all forms of serious music, on various voices and instruments, of the highest quality.

bonding with the community. Third, I have thrice served on the Board of Trustees in Winnipeg, for two years as President, and have contributed to various other committees or in diverse other ways served my local church. Fourth, I have emphasized the history of Judeo-Christianity and of the Church in virtually every course I have ever taught, partly because of their centrality in all pre-modern historical periods, but also because I have always been passionately interested in the subject. I have striven to learn what I didn't know and to understand what I didn't believe, and to present my lectures with the best combination of criticism and empathy that a UU could muster. I regard as high compliments, indeed, one from a Catholic and the other from a Lutheran, that I taught them more about their own faith in one year than they had learned from twelve years of Sunday School. Fourth, I am a UU groupee. In addition to giving sermons frequently, I have gone to conferences, attended and facilitated workshops, made presentations, worshipped in churches, and entered into discussions with our faith's theological, scholarly and administrative leadership from coast to coast, below the 49th parallel, and in France and England. From everyone of these sources I have learnt some things, found inspiration, and been intellectually and spiritually challenged. For my listeners this morning, I hope to distil from all these experiences something of interest and value.

Throughout my adolescence and first university degree, I was at least more a non-believer in the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection than I was a believer in anything else at all. As soon as I became capable of religious self-examination, I was bothered by the apparent absence of any positive belief within my UU faith, a concern that I must say has been much ameliorated in recent years. So I remained primarily an anti-Christian, someone proud of grounding his values and even understanding of ultimate concerns in secular reason.

After ten more years, three countries and two graduate degrees, we found ourselves in Winnipeg, where the Rev. Norman Naylor helped me think in terms of "religious humanism". But I remained dissatisfied at some deeper level, both intellectually and spiritually. I had long ago come up with the mantra that, while humanism was a great--indeed, the essential--place to start, it was a hell of a place to finish! I asked myself such questions as: if my faith were really just a philosophy, why did I go to church? if earth-bound science and human-based ethics were all there were, what was the point or purpose of life? was there meaning to life if no higher power gave it any? if intelligent, well-educated and ethical people, in overwhelming numbers over two and a half millennia, believed in a supernatural force and in revealed sacred texts, who was I so impertinently to diverge from their paths? Somehow, something significant and valuable had to be buried underneath the literal words of the sacred text.

But I could not give up my faith in science and reason. Recent converts to UUism in the 1950s through '70s frequently confessed that

the intellectual criticism of their religion came early but the leap of faith into humanism was so frightening and momentous that it took several more years. Learning to live without God, or at least without Christ, terrified them; surely they'd end up in Hell! I eventually came to realize that the leap of faith in the opposite direction--that is, from humanism back into religious belief--was just as frightening as from faith to disbelief. I found many humanists actually afraid to depart from or add to science, to trust hardly even our emotional feelings, let alone something one might call the spirit, and to add a non-rational, non-secular or non-material apprehension to our lives. Note: I said "non-rational", not "irrational"; no one was asked to abandon reason, but to attempt, rather, to supplement it.

Today, I still cannot abandon reason, criticism and science. Not only do I feel great confidence in their certainties and even in their questions and ambiguities, but I thrill with pride at UUism's determination to hold nothing so sacred that it's beyond criticism or satire and to treat all matters as both earnest and hilarious. Our seven principles have taught me, among other things, that the process of religious search is essential, that the manner of seeking understanding must be secular and critical, not at all dependant on some other-worldly revelation, even if a sense of the spirit remains active. The failure of most religions is just as much about how the beliefs are reached and discussed as about what those beliefs are.

But at the end of all our solid and careful processes, what have humanists learnt about ultimate questions, what do we know, in what

of form and substance do we believe? At least we know that the Universe does not require a Creator and that human destiny is in earth-bound hands, and these are great truths. But is this enough if one wishes fully to understand the human predicament? And if it's enough, why is humanist self-doubt so often shown by our intolerance of opinions originating in the spirit and of those who speak of God, even if these spiritualists and deists belong to our church? After all, our 16th-century beginnings were solidly based on biblical theism and remained so for many well into the 20th century.

My next step in this spiritual search was challenging, fascinating and sometimes exhilarating, but I am glad to have eventually (and recently) left it behind. Christians assert, among other things, that they see God through Christ Jesus, that the Divine Father sent His Divine Son, not only to atone for human sins, but also to help humans find and know their Lord. Christianity is the only religion in which a wholly divine being became a wholly historical individual. While I could never accept these claims as literal truth, I began to grant that, as metaphors, such ideas might offer significant help towards understanding human nature, the miracles of the natural world, the process of history, and the apprehension of the ultimate mysteries of existence. Twenty-five hundred years of theological study should not be written off as completely mistaken. So I devoted the middle years of my life to searching out the analysis and interpretation that lay underneath the surface literalism. As I've said at least once before in a sermon, I deeply regret the biblical fundamentalism of many of my fellow humanists, who feel they must interpret the Bible literally

so that they can the more easily reject it!

For starters, the Jewish faith believes that God guides, indeed acts through, history, which certainly makes the study of history an important undertaking. As well, I found intellectually worth pursuing the notion that God became Human and so revealed Himself as something historically tangible. If we used this idea as a metaphor, would it help us understand ourselves and our place in the Universe? As a professional historian, I was of course flattered to think that History was considered one of God's three ways of revealing Herself and Her intentions--the Bible and the scientifically accessible Natural World being the other two. But on the other hand, I saw immediately how Christianity also betrayed important Jewish insights, in at least two ways.

One was this very assertion that a human prophet was God Himself. By making God closer and more palpable through this manifestation in human form, Christians broke the second Commandment, the one about graven images. The invisible and transcendent Deity, never seen and who would answer probing questions by the hardly useful statement "I am that I am", was now presented, not only as an image in people's minds, but as an icon on crucifixes and in painting and sculpture. The intellectual challenge to understand and the spiritual challenge to love this invisible and intangible God, which Moslem theology was to reassert, suddenly became, through Christian doctrine, deceptively easier. The leap of faith was thereby narrowed (even as it was in another sense widened--namely, by the counter-scientific aspect of this same doctrine of Incarnation).

The second betrayal was also ironic. The doctrine that God had become incarnate in History and Nature seemed to reaffirm the unity of all reality--in fact, transcendence and immanence were intimately brought together,--whereas Christianity, admittedly with the help of Greek philosophy, actually drove a dualistic wedge between this world and the other, faith and science, flesh and spirit, good and evil, reason and feeling, etc., etc. Like most religions, Judaism believed in the wholeness of the world (a position which to my knowledge Islam did not reassert), but Christianity effectively divided it.²

Nonetheless, I have spent hours trying to unpack this God/Human doctrine and fewer hours studying the Bible. I believe that one of the most important potential contributions of UUism to the religious understanding of today's world would be a biblical criticism drawing on our particular perspectives. The Bible is basic to three world-wide religions (the Koran being largely derived from it) and is thereby fundamental to almost all Western, African and Southeast Asian cultures. Furthermore, its appeal continues to bind many potential UUs to their Jewish or Christian heritage. Is there any religious group that undertakes a Biblical criticism, not only employing scientific and historical principles (which the best Christian scholars have long done), but also applying secular or humanist presuppositions? I'm not aware of any.

² While I am here, may I also point to another uniqueness of Christianity, another doctrine shattering wholeness? This is the belief in the sexual innocence of Jesus. No other religious leader is held to have denied himself sexual pleasure and long-term commitment to a beloved other, one of the central ambiguities of all human experience. Ironically, no other religious founder has been so overtly a feminist, but Christ's virginity--unfortunately claimed to be a virtue--drove a wedge between males and females, and gave Christianity a uniquely neurotic attitude towards sex and the erotic!

Although I continued not believing in God, I found that using the word "God" filled many gaps in conception and communication that no other word or phrase could fill so easily. This does not require any of the previous definitions of God, whether anthropomorphically literal or abstractly philosophical; it requires merely reflective distance, the recognition of mystery, and the humility of embracing the sacred; perhaps, it's accepting God as a process rather than as an entity, as a verb rather than a noun. I have no trouble defining unexpected and gratuitous occasions for happiness as among "God's blessings", not because I believe that some actual Divinity deliberately favoured me or one of my friends, but because I know of no better way to recognize how rare, precious and unearned such blessings are.

If one turned to the Bible, one might find that the story of Adam and Eve, properly interpreted, helps us understand human drive and the human predicament. Moses teaches us about vision and determination, as well as the founding of new societies; David and Bathsheba, about temptation, seduction and treachery; Ruth, about immigration and assimilation; Isaiah, about peace, love and co-operation as social ideals; the disagreement between the epistles of Paul and James over faith and predestination vs. good works and free will, how fundamental to all questions of morality such a divergence is. Often, the stories and their messages are no better, or no worse, than the Greek myths or Grimms' fairy tales. Sometimes, they're only useful as analogies and metaphors, but almost always (like poetry or art), they are a way of knowing, a way of understanding, that is

irreplaceable.

Contrary to popular belief, the Bible is not worth much as an ethical teacher. Of course, its moral ambiguity helps the scholarly and the curious explore ethical issues and formulate moral questions, just as so much other great literature also does. But most people take away from the Bible the ethical position they initially brought to it. Is God judgmental and even wrathful, or is She merciful and compassionate? Is the Hammurabi injunction about eyes and teeth an upper limit of punishment not to be exceeded, or is it a minimum requirement definitely to be enforced? Are we really supposed to love our enemies, which is actually the only unique moral injunction in Christianity, or are we to smite them with unrelenting force, such as other passages even in the Christian Testament exhort? What is really meant by the statement that God helps those who help themselves? When I finally read the Christian Testament from end to end, two summers ago, I was deeply shocked by its strident and persistent anti-Judaism, its hostility to females and even to the family, and its frequent exhortations to harsh revenge and stern punishments. I now regret having so strongly advised all my students to read it!

That experience was one of the factors leading me to my present position and third signpost. In sharp contrast to the Christian claim that the Incarnation and Resurrection help lead us to God, I now believe that Christ obstructs our view of God and gets in the way of any properly religious worship or ethics. In contrast to the general Occidental religious view that God must be worshipped as the Creator for us to develop the true notion of the sacred and a proper attitude

towards worship, I now believe that even the notion of a Deity obstructs our view and hampers our efforts. But these are very recent insights, and before I try to develop or apply them, I should go back to earlier changes in my personal theology.

I'd like to say that this apprehension of the sacred began with childhood wonder about butterflies, cats, x-ray machines and avalanches. And I suppose it did, though if one stops there, we're left with only curiosity, feelings and aesthetics as potentially religious urges. Significant for me was the full realization of the dangers inherent in such religious motivations as those of Osama Bin Laden and George W. Bush, though they're only the most recent examples. Underlying all my thoughts was the passage, read earlier in the service, that I had found not long after Bernie Loomer wrote it in 1987; let me reproduce it here:

Why deify this interconnected web of existence by calling it "God"? Why not simply refer to the world and to the processes of life? ... The world is God because it is the source and preserver of meaning; because the creative advance of the world in its adventures is the supreme cause to be served; because even in our desecration of our space and time within it, the world is holy ground; and because it contains and yet enshrouds the ultimate mystery inherent in life itself.

"The Size of God," American Journal of Theology and Philosophy (1987): 41-42

This passage has become the most important series of words in the mature formation of my religious understanding. It is not attempting to define religion or the causes of religion (e.g, awe before the world, the joy of living, and fear of dying), that is, some institutional undertaking created and controlled by humans yet

claiming to be driven by God's Word. It is not getting at some actual "God", but at the essence of Meaning, something more important than a Deity, even while only the word "God" serves to name it. One of the creators of what is called Process Theology, Loomer does not separate the Creator from the Creation; he sees them as the same thing: as the Creation evolves, it serves as its own Creator.³

Bernie Loomer brings together the physical universe and the evolving processes of life; a grasp of both the ultimate meaning and the purpose of existence; the recognition that we waste, pollute and destroy that which should be most precious; and the assertion that the mystery of it all is to be found only here, in the world and its evolution, both obscured by mists. There is some tautological reasoning, some circularity, in Loomer's presentation, but it rises above those criticisms by its clarity, poetry, and energy.

Nonetheless, the intellectual strength of his words for at least ten years remained at the level of reason and metaphor--I have no idea why: the humanist's fear of both letting go and committing to? or some profundity in the words greater than my ability to absorb them? Only recently have I grasped with great force the notion that "sacred-talk" was more important than "God-talk" and that, as a humanist, I was as uncomfortable initially with one term as I was with the other. The sheer majesty of the world and its workings is too overwhelming to be merely described, or even just wondered at; in some sense, we have to let ourselves be conquered by the magnitude of

³ Beginning life I believe as a Baptist, Loomer ended his days suspected of having embraced the heresy of pantheism. While enjoying many discussions with UUs, I believe he never joined our church.

its bulk, power and mystery. The meaning of life is not to be found in some existentialist proposition that it's simply whatever each of us makes of it; somehow, we have to accept and affirm that life has meaning in its very existence, in its collectivity of all sentient beings, and that it has meaning for the tautological reason that, outside of life, there is no meaning: that is, life and meaning are one and the same. Our adventure takes place on holy ground, in sacred time, amidst mysteriously divine circumstances.

Now, some of you may think I'm merely betraying the weakness of age, the fatigue of having lived too long, but let me at least say that the realization I'm trying to describe and convey did in fact precede my recent brush with death through heart failure. It cannot be blamed on the extraordinary feelings I had while regaining my health from receiving the love and support of friends.

In recent years, the following things came together for me: the correspondence between Loomer's passage and our seven UU principles and, in addition, the overwhelming reality of the importance of life within transitory time and space.⁴ At the same time, the following thoughts became central: that the traditional assertions of institutional religion usually come between human beings, on the one hand, and both the sacred and the moral, on the other; and that Jesus as Christ is an obstacle to, not a vehicle for, reaching an adequate apprehension of the sacred. I find Him as much a hindrance as an asset in critiquing socio-political activities and in formulating

⁴ Perhaps I should also say, parenthetically, that it took me years to find "religion" in the substance and wording of our seven principles; at first I could see in them only philosophical propositions.

personal morality, not because some of his exhortations as recorded in the Bible are immoral and unwise (though some are!), but because even the virtuous injunctions, especially as filtered through the historical Church, get in the way of thinking for ourselves. Humans we are told are free, but we should also be responsible; actions are not right or wrong because Jesus or some cleric said so, but because they are helpful and appropriate or unhelpful and inappropriate in a given circumstance, as compared with similar circumstances in other times and places. (Ironically, Jesus himself pointed this way when he reduced all the commandments to just two.)

I believe any humanist can, and often does, reject Jesus in these terms, on these grounds, but the rejection is solely secular, sometimes smart-ass and often superficial--at least it was in my case. That is, Jesus is written off before his story and message have been thoroughly and empathetically investigated. The reason my current conception is so powerful for me is that it came after years of wrestling with the Christian doctrine and its biblical text in the belief that important insights lay behind or beneath words that I found literally incredulous or absurd. After all, some UUs call themselves Christians, and many more regard Jesus as an ethical prophet of uniquely special status; others want to place Buddha and Lao-tse on the same level, perhaps also Ghandi, King and Mother Theresa. While all of these individuals should be admired, they all have their faults, and none of them should displace our own responsibility to think for ourselves.

In summary, the world is sacred, I submit, because no

description of Nature and Life is adequate that refuses to admit the words "holy" and "sacred" into its vocabulary. The processes at play in our universe are larger than rational comprehension and always will be. Meaning is already within the basic reality of existence, and morality must be discerned directly from the context of action examined within our previous experience. All science, history and literature (even so-called sacred literature) may be invoked to challenge our minds and to give resonance to our tentative thoughts, but the enterprise and the stage on which it is enacted are too sacred for any vicarious atonement to substitute for and wipe away our own responsibility and too sacred to be apprehended from merely a secular, let alone a so-called revealed, description. Its holiness is in our own hands.