



“Why I am *Not* a Unitarian Universalist”

Remarks offered by
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Opening words:

In 1990 when I graduated from Meadville Lombard, the Unitarian Universalist seminary in Chicago, I did so with the help of a doctoral dissertation entitled “theistic humanism.” The god that the “theism” referred to in that title was a truncated Christian god. I had been raised as a Methodist, but I had lost my belief in a “personal” god. Today even the remains of that truncated god have vanished.

So, recently I sat down and tried to decide what I did believe. I discovered I couldn’t, in all honesty, call myself a Unitarian Universalist. This morning I would like to tell you why, and what I do call myself these days,

Reflection:

It’s true, I am an ordained and a retired Unitarian Universalist minister, even a “minister emeritus,” but I choose not to call myself a Unitarian Universalist.

Why?

The reasons are complicated and complex, but I will give you two reasons. First, what does “Unitarian” mean anyway? It means “the belief in one god,” doesn’t it? Well, frankly, I don’t believe in any gods. And I do not like calling myself something I am not. So, I’m not a Unitarian.

And what does “Universalist” mean? It means “the belief that no one will ever end up in hell; that everyone, universally, will go to heaven.” But, I don’t believe there is a heaven – I don’t believe there is anything after death – no heaven, no hell, no limbo, no purgatory, nothing!! Therefore, I’m not a Universalist either.

In other words, I am not, theologically speaking, a Unitarian Universalist.

But, even though I don’t call myself a Unitarian Universalist, I am more of a Unitarian Universalist than I am anything else. I just wish the association that calls itself the “Unitarian Universalist association” would realize that its name no longer describes the beliefs of the majority of its members and would change its name.

And what would I like to see them change it to?

I’ll return to what I think the name of our association should be at the end of this reflection, but let me give you the second reason why I choose not to call myself a Unitarian Universalist.

The name issue is, I consider, rather minor, because it can always be changed. There is, however, a more significant reason I choose not to call myself a Unitarian Universalist. I have noticed something weird, odd, and very different about our association that few people seem to recognize – or if they have, they just haven’t said much about it. I have noticed that we are almost exclusively a nominalist organization. What do I mean by a nominalist organization? In philosophy, nominalism stands in contrast to realism. Realism is a description of the way the world *is*, whereas nominalism is a description of the way the world *should be*.

A philosophy, even a religion, can be realistic, nominalistic, or both – that is, it can be about how the world really is (science in today’s language) or how it should be (ethics in today’s language) or how it should be based on how it is (that is, a religion – but more often than not, built on myth rather than science). Almost every religion I have ever studied is realistic at its core. Each of their descriptions begins with some explanation of how the world is. They are seldom, in my opinion, right (after all, most of them are looking at the world through 2000 year old eyes), but they at least begin with a realist description of the world, and from those realistic descriptions they construct their nominalist visions of how they believe the world should be. Unitarian Universalism seems to be different. It has very little realism, if any, at its core. It is a very nominalistic religion. That is why it so often is involved in ethical stands of one kind or another – because its primary interest is in what should be – not what is.

I recall that during the abortion controversy, several years back, there were UUs who championed abortion as an ethical means of defending a woman's right to choose. Others, based on Albert Schweitzer's "respect for life" encouraged, also for ethical reasons, caution in the use of abortion. Both positions were the result of nominalistic beliefs. I recall seeing a picture once of a picket-line – on one side of which was a group of people holding a sign saying "Unitarian Universalists support the use of abortion," and on the other side another group of people with a sign saying "Unitarian Universalists oppose abortion." I was, at that time, and still am, very proud to be associated with an institution that could encourage each set of individuals to have and act on her or his own beliefs, and yet sit and sing together on Sunday mornings.

Yet, still, I am concerned that without a realistic core, eventually our nominal or ethical stands have the potential to split this organization. Thank goodness the abortion debate dissipated before it became an issue of contention within our churches and fellowships. In other words, it is my belief that we need some realistic explanation of the world, with a few mythical elements in it as possible.

So, the second reason I do not call myself a Unitarian Universalist – besides the minor fact that the name is a misnomer - is because I think we should be a full-service religion, meaning we should not be afraid to make speculations about the nature of reality (and, of course, when we do speculate we need to acknowledge that our speculations are just that – speculations). I think, even the admission "I don't know" is preferable to saying nothing – as we do now.

But what could I say exists if I were to claim that god and heaven don't exist. What's left?

Well, the opposite of a supernatural worldview is a natural worldview, and I don't think it is all that much of a stretch to champion the natural world. In a way, I think we do that now, but only implicitly. I also think that if and when we voice our explicit realist beliefs, we give grounding to our nominal ones. We could become a much fuller religion by adding realistic ideas to our nominalistic beliefs.

What do I mean? You want an example?

Alright, let me give you one from the Abraham religions example first. Abrahamic religions, you will recall, are those religions that began with Abraham in ancient Judea – namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Each of them owes much to the ideas that preceded it. One of the major concepts in these Abraham religions is the concept of life-after-death – they all believe that there is some kind of life after death. It is a part of the world that they believe really is. Around this realistic belief all kinds of nominalistic beliefs have collected. In Christianity it is the belief in salvation and what one has to do to earn a place in heaven after death. Probably the most extreme use of the life-after-death belief is that used by Islamic suicide bombers. Their willingness to die as martyrs for whatever lies after life is primarily a belief that this world is not where one wants to be – but rather in that other supernatural world.

In a similar fashion, all of the Abraham religions minimize or downplay *this* world in favor of *whatever might come after it* – whether there is anything after this life or not. The consequence of this belief is disastrous. The need to control our bulging populations, our increasing climate change, our deteriorating environment, all are ignored by a major portion of the believing world looking forward to their next life out of *this* world where those problems are no longer their concern.

A naturalist worldview that does not acknowledge anything after death – it does not have such views or hold such beliefs. Because naturalism sees many connections between ourselves and this world, but none after this life, hence, we are concerned about *this* world and work hard to make it the best world possible. Believing that what is real is only this world and that belief make this life all the more precious and significant.

That's why I have come to believe that it is important that we voice our beliefs about what is real, *as well as* what should be. To learn what is, we need to turn to the scientist – and to learn what should be, we need to listen to the philosopher and to our own hearts.

So, alright, now, what name would I prefer to be associated with?

Let's be honest, the name – Unitarian Universalist - is not a descriptive name – it is a historical name, and as such it has great value, but historical or not, it is no

longer who most of us are – and it most certainly is not who I am.

I like the Linnaean use of binary names – the use of genus and species, as in *homo sapiens*, for biological names. That is basically what Jesse Jackson did when he recommended back in 1969 “African American” as the name of a specific ethnic group in lieu of some of the other names that were being used to describe that group. He gave the binary name “African Americans,” and the binary name idea caught on: now there are “native Americans,” “Anglo Americans,” “Irish Americans,” etc. There are also “aboriginal Canadians,” “aboriginal Australians,” “Anglo new Zealanders,” and many, many others. This kind of name tells us much about the individuals they describe.

Since religions are primarily defined by their belief systems, that is by a combination of their nominalistic and their realistic beliefs, it seems to make sense to me to call a religion by the essence of both its nominalistic *and* its realistic names. For example, Catholics wouldn’t be just Catholics but rather “catholic super naturalists.” That is they would be known as how they believe the world should be (catholic), and how they believe the world is (supernatural).

I’m sure everyone here can and most likely will come up with their own pet name for “who we are” – which is fine. The name I like best is “humanistic naturalists.” That name describes how I believe we should be, that is, we should treat one another with humanist values, and it is also how I believe the world is, that is, it is a natural world, and only a natural world, not a *supernatural* one.

If there was a North Texas Church Of Humanistic Naturalists, I would be a member. But quite frankly, even the name “church” kinda gives me the willies. The name “church” first appeared when used by Paul in the New Testament to describe small local communities of Christians. I think another name would be more appropriate. How about the north Texas Institute of Humanistic Naturalism? What is an “institute”? An “institute” is an organization that exists for the promotion of a cause. So, what would our cause be? Honest religion!

So there you have it – it is humanistic naturalism I believe in, not Unitarian Universalism, if I were a younger man, I would nail this thesis on some Unitarian Universalist church’s door (or, in today’s language, post it on the internet) with the hopes of

kicking off a new reformation – a new way of being in and seeing the world. I cannot imagine anything more important.

Closing words:

I believe there are very few things more important than being honest about what does exist, and what should exist. That is, I believe, true religion. And, I also believe, that it is humanistic naturalism that at this point in the evolutionary and intellectual development of human animal best fits that prerequisite for a genuine religion.

I would like to end by asking you to join me, if not as a member of a humanistic naturalist institution, at least as a sympatric humanistic naturalist - in your heart. Maybe someday we’ll have a name, and an association of our own – and it may even be the association formerly known as the “Unitarian Universalist Association.”