

Humanist Visions: The World City

A chapel service of the Andover-Newton Theological Students

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Opening Words

The opening words are by Thomas Paine: "My country is the World, and my religion is to do good."

Reading from *Unitarianism and Humanism* by John Dietrich

Today what everyone knows about Humanism is that it's academic and passionless. Humanist sermons are full of ideas but they don't move you emotionally. That would be cheating.

But that's not how things used to be.

In the 1920s John Dietrich saw Humanism as a revolution in religion, and he preached it like a revolutionary. The point of Dietrich's Humanism wasn't to get rid of religious passion and enthusiasm, but to channel that energy into the service of humanity.

It was a powerful message. Dietrich's sermons had to be moved to a local theater, because he could draw a thousand people or more.

The part I'm going to read you comes near the end of the sermon, after Dietrich has laid out the fundamental principles of Humanism and described the perfect society he believed it could establish.

I offer it with a question: Why don't Humanists sound like this any more?

This is indeed a faith that should put fire into the bones of every man who loves his kind. ... This faith will give volume and power to our Unitarian movement, and it is this faith that will conquer the world if only we carry it to the world in such form as to make men despise things as they are and passionately long for things as they should be. ...

This grand faith ... the popular religion has not given us and apparently has no aim of giving us. Its dream of a perfect social order has its accomplishment somewhere else and has no relation whatever to this actual order in which we now live. ...

Therefore must come with passion and with enthusiasm our humanistic religion – not preaching acquiescence and submission to the present order, but holding up in contrast to what we see about us an era in which reigns perfect peace, perfect justice, and perfect good will – and declaring unto men that in this idea alone is there any sacredness and authority ...

This is the faith that the world needs today. It does not need ... more priests and prayers and holy books, it does not need literary essays on academic subjects; but it does need the never-ending voice of the prophet going up and down the land, crying, not as of old, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord," but "Prepare ye the way of mankind, and make its way straight."

Sermon

I wanted to start by saying what a privilege it is to talk to divinity students. Now, I used to be a graduate student myself, so I know that you're thinking: "He can't possibly mean that."

Because graduate school is an ego-deflating experience. I remember filling out a form in my department office. It had a blank labeled "Academic Status". I didn't know what that meant, so I asked the secretary: "Do I have academic status?"

And she said, "Not much."

So I know how easy it is for you to imagine that you're not very important.

But in the years to come a lot of you will stand in a lot of pulpits and talk to a lot of people. If those people were here, they would fill not just this room, but maybe a stadium or even more. So if I can communicate an idea to you, there's no telling how far that idea might go. That's why it really is a privilege to talk to divinity students.

I thought I'd tell you a little about my religious journey. I was raised as a conservative Christian, revolted against that in my teens, and then after a lot of searching, became a Pagan.

I was attracted to Paganism because it valued experience and encouraged experimentation. What happens if you meditate? What happens if you chant and drum? If you visualize a god or goddess and talk to that deity in prayer, how does that experience change you?

I got so far away from Christianity that if you had asked me whether I believed in Jesus, I'd have said, "I don't know, let's tell his stories and perform his rituals and see what happens."

I became a Unitarian Universalist because that seemed like a good place to continue my searching and experimenting. And mostly, it was. But I kept having run-ins with one particular kind of UU. They called themselves Humanists. They were mostly men, usually older than me, and as best I could tell their main spiritual practice was to ridicule other people's spiritual practices.

Their central belief seemed to be that everybody else was wrong. If I challenged them to say something positive about Humanism and not just criticize other religions, sometimes they had trouble grasping the question. The *positive* thing about Humanism, one of them told me, is that "you don't have to believe a lot of mumbo-jumbo."

Now, up to a point I could sympathize with that attitude. During my teen-age rebellion, the world had seemed full of people trying to make me believe something ridiculous, and I was just not going to. In those days I loved to hear somebody really smart tear into Christianity. Bertrand Russell wrote some essays that were incredibly snide and cruel, and I thought they were wonderful.

Because at that time I had a negative religious identity: I was an anti-Christian, and I believed in anti-creed.

Do you know what an anti-creed is? It's where you list all your *dis*beliefs. If somebody asked me about my religion out would come my list: "I don't believe in God. I don't believe in prayer. I don't believe in miracles. I don't believe in an afterlife." I was reciting an anti-creed.

Now, some Humanists might ask: “What’s wrong with that?” I’ll answer that question with this one: What ever happened to the anti-communists?

Twenty or thirty years ago, a politician could base his whole identity on anti-communism. What happened? Did something go wrong with anti-communism? Not at all. Something went wrong with communism. And when one fell apart, so did the other.

You see, a negative identity ties you to your enemies. You depend on them. An anti-Christian or an anti-fundamentalist or an anti-theist, depends on the Christians, the fundamentalists, and the theists. If the positive identity becomes irrelevant, so does the negative. That’s why, in the long term, a healthy religious identity needs positive content. You need to affirm things, not just deny them.

Back to my story.

So, years went by, and other than those run-ins with Humanists, I was doing well as a UU. I joined committees, taught classes. I even preached a sermon. Eventually I got email from someone who read my sermon on the Internet and wanted to publish it in his journal.

The name of the journal was *Religious Humanism*. This guy had read *my* sermon and thought *I* was preaching Humanism.

Imagine my surprise.

So now I’m curious, and I start reading about Humanism. You know how that goes: You read one book and it tells you to read five other books. I kept drifting back in time, reading older and older authors. And I discovered something: The Humanist tradition has a lot of positive content.

People like Spinoza and Thomas Paine and John Dietrich talked not just about the flaws in traditional religion, but about the world that could be built if spiritual enthusiasm could be applied to human problems.

Humanism in their day was not an anti-creed. It was not about stamping out *The God Delusion* or seeking *The End of Faith*. It balanced its critical thinking with imagination. It was idealistic, forward-looking, visionary.

Who knew? How could I have been an active UU for a dozen years without hearing about this passionate, enthusiastic brand of Humanism? And more important: Dietrich pictured Humanism conquering the world. What happened? How did we get from there to here?

The short answer is that the 20th century happened. It didn’t go according to plan. In retrospect, turn-of-the-century Humanists had been naively optimistic. Unitarians of that era affirmed “the progress of mankind, onward and upward forever.” Robert Ingersoll, a popular 19th century lecturer known as “the Great Agnostic” – picture that; people used to turn out in droves to hear somebody called the Great Agnostic – he said, “The future will verify all grand and brave predictions.”

Let me repeat that: “The future will verify all grand and brave predictions.” Imagine how it would feel to believe that.

But what did the future really bring? Two world wars, the Great Depression, and the Holocaust; the Russian Revolution, which promised so much and turned out so badly. By the middle of the century we had the H-bomb, the Cold War, and McCarthyism.

The second half of the 20th century saw another cycle of idealism and disillusionment. The Civil Rights movement didn't end racism. Vietnam didn't end militarism. And we lost the War on Poverty.

Today, eighty years after the Scopes Monkey Trial, fundamentalism has not faded away. And the United States of America, whose example Thomas Paine thought would lead the world into a new era of enlightened government, is inventing reasons to start wars and is playing games with the definition of torture.

No wonder Humanists get so demoralized. Embarrassed by the idealism of its youth, Humanism shies away from Imagination and retreats into criticism. *Imaginary* things are what other people believe in; we stick to the cold, hard facts.

And that's a problem, I think. Because man does not live by facts alone. "Without vision, the people perish." Without vision, you can't inspire. All you can do is criticize and complain.

But attacking other religious traditions won't revitalize Humanism. Debunking other people's passion and enthusiasm won't reawaken ours. Only a rebirth of the Humanist imagination will do that.

The prophet Joel said, "I will pour out my spirit on all humanity. Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. Your old people shall dream dreams, and your young shall see visions."

Dreams. Visions. That's what we need. That's where passion and enthusiasm come from.

Now you may be wondering: What kind of visions can Humanists have?

In the time remaining, I thought I'd remind you of one of the oldest and most important Humanist visions: the World City.

Humanism doesn't recognize a founder like Jesus or Buddha, but you can make a decent case that Humanism started the day the Greek philosopher Diogenes coined the word *Cosmopolis*, the World City. From that came *cosmopolitan*, citizen of the world.

Diogenes was followed by Stoic and Epicurean philosophers who faced a totally new situation. Alexander's conquests had brought Greek culture to a wider audience. Greek philosophers were now addressing not just Greeks, but Persians, Egyptians, Chaldeans, Jews, and peoples they had never heard of. They needed a message not just for Greeks, but for humans. They needed a cosmopolitan message, a humanist message.

But you have to understand that when Diogenes first said the word *Cosmopolis*, he was not naming any visible object. Even Alexander's empire was never a world government, and it splintered when he died. No. From the beginning, *the Cosmopolis was a city of the imagination*.

You were a cosmopolitan, because you recognized a bond with all people, wherever they came from. They too were citizens of the World City. They might not know about their citizenship or recognize yours. They may never have imagined the World City themselves. But they were your fellow citizens all the same.

Centuries later, the vision of the Cosmopolis combined with Spinoza's vision of an impersonal God. The result was Deism, the religion of people like Thomas Paine and Benjamin Franklin. "My country," Paine wrote, "is the world."

Unlike the gods of other religions, the God of the Deists played no favorites. *All* people were his creations, and they had been endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. Your cosmopolitan citizenship now entitled you to claim freedom of conscience, freedom of speech, freedom of religion.

But in the beginning these rights were as imaginary as the World City itself. No government recognized them. No court enforced them. To practical people, people who only believed in cold hard facts, it was all nonsense. You might just as well tell sharks and wolves that you have a right not to be eaten.

The rights of the Cosmopolis *became* real – at least in some parts of the world – because people were willing to live for them and in some cases to die for them. Why did they do that? Why risk your life for an imaginary city and its imaginary rights?

They did it because they had seen the vision. And their inspiration came not from heavenly power, but from the beauty of the vision itself. They had faith that other people would see the World City in their minds and fall in love with it, just as they had.

Today, the Cosmopolis is still only half real. And that's why it is so important to keep visiting the half that is still imaginary. To see, for example, that everyone is respected in the Cosmopolis, that the hungry are fed, the sick are cared for, and the ignorant are educated. There is justice in the Cosmopolis, there are institutions for resolving conflicts peacefully, and so there is never any cause for violence.

And if that vision seems ridiculously naïve and impractical to you, you need to remember that not so long ago the whole city was imaginary.

Now, if you're going to help bring this imaginary city more fully into reality, you need to know about the competing visions. Many people who sound like cosmopolitans, people who talk about rights and freedom and democracy, are not really talking about the World City at all. Because the World City has two rivals: the Tribe and the Empire.

Let me tell you a little about each of them.

In the Tribal Vision, humanity can never really be united, because *our* people and *their* people (however we define those terms) are just different. We may be able to get along, but we will always be separate. A black man in the Jim Crow South, for example, may be a good Christian, may be educated, and may even be rich – but he still can't sit in the front of the bus. Because blacks and whites are just different. Like Sunni and Shia are different. It's a fact of life and there's nothing to be done about it.

In the Imperial Vision, humans start out in separate tribes, but they can be unified by an Empire. You can join an Empire, because an Empire has some unifying principle that you can make your own. If you surrender to the Empire and adopt its unifying principle, you can be assimilated.

The unifying principle can be almost anything – political, economic, religious, philosophical, cultural. Gauls joined the Roman Empire by fighting in the legions. Japan joined the empire of Democracy by accepting a constitution and holding elections. China joined the empire of

Capitalism by recognizing the international property system and submitting to the rules of the WTO.

Surrender, convert, and be assimilated – that’s the Imperial pattern.

So the Empire and the World City are both unifying visions. But there is one important difference: In the Cosmopolitan Vision, the World is unified *at this very moment*. All people are my fellow citizens *already, right now*.

But in the Imperial Vision, people will become my fellow citizens *when they submit to the Empire*. Human unity, in the Imperial Vision, is millennial. When everyone accepts the Empire, the World will be one. When everyone converts to Christ or becomes capitalist or democratic or pro-American – then the millennium will have arrived and all people can live together in peace.

But not until then.

Where the Cosmopolis sees only citizens, the Empire sees three kinds of people: citizens, outsiders yet to be converted, and enemies who have rejected the Empire and must be defeated.

Cosmopolitans and imperialists view their opponents very differently. A cosmopolitan sees them as citizens with rights. Thomas Paine wrote, “He that would make his own liberty secure must guard even his enemy from oppression; for if he violates this duty he establishes a precedent that will reach to himself.”

Imperial logic is completely different. Rights exist only within the Empire. Those who reject the Empire are practically demons: They stand in the way of the millennial paradise that the Empire will bring someday. The perfection of that end justifies whatever means the Empire needs to use to defeat its enemies.

This conflict of visions is playing out very clearly in the current debate about terrorism. In the rhetoric of the Bush administration, our opponents are demonic. They “hate freedom.” They are, in the President’s words, “fighting a war against humanity.” The only way to preserve our rights, we are told, is to violate theirs.

And so, if you don’t belong to a nation that has signed the Geneva Conventions, its provisions don’t protect you. If you behave in ways we consider barbaric, we can treat you barbarically. “Terrorists” can be held without charges and imprisoned without trials. And if torturing them helps keep you safe, you should be happy about it.

But we’re not happy.

Because we are citizens of the World, and so are our enemies. Our rights are not secure while their rights are being violated.

To the Empire, that statement is gibberish. Imperialists can’t even make enough sense out of it to disagree properly; they just know that you said something ridiculous.

The Vision of the World City has gotten so co-opted that many imperialists do not even know about it. When they use terms like *freedom* and *democracy* and *human rights*, they honestly believe that they are talking about the same things we are, the same things America’s founders were talking about.

Because they’ve never seen the World City.

The most fundamental failure in America today is this failure of vision. The World City is every bit as beautiful today as it was centuries ago. But if you've never seen it, you don't know that. Those of us who have seen it should be spreading the vision, because that's the first step in making this imaginary city more real.

Let me sum it all up. Humanism can't survive on criticism alone. We can't be an anti-creed. People will not flock to us to share our disbeliefs. To be a vital religion, we need to balance critical thinking with imagination.

We need vision.

But fortunately, vision is not foreign to us. It is our heritage; it is in our tradition. And the World, I believe, still needs the visions that we have to offer.

Closing Words

The closing words are by Lawrence of Arabia: "All men dream, but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds, wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act on their dreams with open eyes, to make them possible."