

I Believe in Good

Reverend Byron Carrier

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This sermon started brewing when I returned from India in 1972 distressed that the eastern way of religion was no better than the western in caring for our given, obvious natural world. In India, the religions mostly promote an “instead of life” state of pure spirituality. The material world and our bodies are all merely maya, illusion. The western world seemed to put this obvious, given life in the pursuit of a supposed afterlife. Both fail to affirm our bodies, cultures and ecosystem as inherently wonderful and deserving of our love, duty and celebration.

This sermon popped into place when I noticed the bumper sticker for the American Humanist association. It reads “I believe in good.”

I believe in good. I believe we’re made of what is already good as it gets better. The goodness I love here is *not just* spiritual, it is material, natural. From the light down to the ground up, it is, as the kids say these days, all good. From cosmic presence to soil to plants to animals to humans who wonder and sing, it is all good. The good that we are is what I gratefully praise, protect, practice and promote: our human lives in this Life that is our precious, precarious home.

I know most people come to church expecting the minister to affirm a belief in God. My way to whatever God may be is *through the goods God made*. I know this God-talk must rankle some of the humanists here to hear of *their* goods. Like them, I weary of prideful boasts about how much people believe in God. It’s as though believing in God is more important than any worldly reality, that believing in God and claiming to be saved excuses any recurring sin. Tertullian went so far as to declare, “It is to be believed *because* it is absurd.” Others note to believe in absurdity is to open to atrocity. I love it that humanists are able to be *skeptical* of God-talk and the purveyors of it. *I think God made us so good we’re able to be, and ought to be, free, intelligent, skeptical, ethical, kind, practical people.*

In my fifty years in the liberal Unitarian Universalist ministry, I've had only a very few humanistic, atheistic congregants whom I didn't admire and like. And in that same time, I've had only a few believers in God who I also didn't admire and like. In other words, not-God talk and God-talk both are okay with me. Both kinds of persons are made of and living in the good.

There are as many ideas about God, good and the rest of reality as there are people. What do I mean by God? By God I mean *the reason and mechanism of there being existence at all*. Whatever invisible speck or vast ongoing process that has generated this, our magnificent cosmos with life evolved to let us view and enjoy it – that generative, sustaining and interactive process – I call God. I don't create my universe, save by apprehension and idea. Rather, it creates me. The reason and the fact that there is existence at all rather than not is what I bow down to and worship in gratitude, celebration and care. This is my religion.

My way to God is *via* what is good. I agree with the Genesis One creation account underlying the core scriptures of the world's three great problem religions, the Talmud, Bible, and Quran. It's the more-or-less evolutionary account of six stages of creation starting with light and ending with humans, males and females, both good. Genesis One is where something humans have called God not only generates existence, but, importantly, calls it "good." On the sixth "day," God calls it, all together, "very good." I agree with the Bible and God on this. Natural existence here on earth with each other and all life – I accept as "good."

Please visit and participate in my website www.earthlyreligion.com for a fuller telling of how the good of Genesis One solves the alienation in the Garden of Eden creation story in Genesis Two and Three.

To the humanists, skeptics, rationalists, and atheists here – please don't wince too much. I don't expect you to believe in the Bible or God to believe in what and who we are as good. We rational, ethical, practical, comical people are better aligned with what is good than a lot of religious people – western and eastern. Both vast world religions can get so godly they ignore and forsake what is good.

Though I critique western and eastern religions here in this way, I also grant that both have elements of serving and savoring this, our embodied world. Christian art used to emphasize the naked human form as divine. Christians used to put peace into their societies by their forgiveness and healing, as similarly did the Buddhists. What's good in religions is the intent people bring to them. A beautiful, abundant peaceful kingdom is part of the goodness sought by seekers and somewhat shown by religions.

Natural existence - our astonishing bodies and minds supported by magnificent complex, interrelated, self-unfolding intelligence *as* our bodily systems and minds - all enlivened in a dynamic and harmonious ecosystem – this I praise, protect, and promote as my religious way. This Eden I would have my religion and culture treat with reverent, creative love, that it blossom and fruit as never before. We may pass in and out of life and culture, but they persist, touched by who we were.

I dive into our goodness, into the structure and dynamism that we, here together, love as our place in life. I enjoy it. I'm grateful. I believe that This, what and who we are, is Good, good in structure and in direction. It doesn't matter if you believe God made it and still cares, or not, for you to live in and up to the good stuff and person you are. When you incarnate as a full human being you are Creation alive, alive as only you can be It. Doing that is its own right and worth.

You are endowed with certain unalienable rights by Creation. Notice our humanistic Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights *don't* say we're given these by God. It says we are endowed by Creation and the Creator, my sort of God. Living up to yourselves and with each other, here in our Eden, free, smart, sexy, fun and responsible – that's religious. Living well in Reality – that's religion.

Oh, ouch! Humanists don't like things religious, too god-y. They also don't like being told what's good. Emerson once complained, "I hate goodies. I hate goodness that preaches. Goodness that preaches undoes itself... Goodies make us very bad . . . We will almost sin to spite them." Want more? He goes on directly to add, "Better indulge yourself, feed fat, drink liquors, than go straitlaced for such cattle as these." (June 23, 1838) I get that. The good I believe is in us as

freedom and conscience. The humanists I've known treat the Creator's Creation far more responsibly and trustingly than many so-called godly believers.

Godly believers can violate God's goods while feeling sanctimonious about it. Consider the religious suicide bomber. He or she is so full of vile hate for vague groups they'd die and kill innocents in general. Lest we feel culturally superior, remember our own recent Inquisition and actual witch hunts. Where are the American religions now that we have a president and party declaring outright exploitation of our only Eden home, waging iconoclastic war on the sacred institutions which tend our land, oceans, air and culture? Where are eastern religions when vast hordes of endemic sufferers are rationalized and abandoned as mere *maya*? Does *believing* in God matter *more* than what God's believers do to each other and the rest of God's good *creation*? Would they praise a Creator while trashing Creation? Where is our skepticism for this anti-worldly alienation, this anti-body, anti-material world built into both western and eastern religions?

Emerson said, "The just thinker will allow full sway to his skepticism." He went on in his essay, *Worship*: "We may well give skepticism as much line as we can. The spirit will return and fill us." Why? Because, "Heaven kindly gave our blood a moral flow." He complains that, "the stern old faiths have pulverized. 'Tis a whole population of gentlemen and ladies out in search of religions," but, "God builds his temple in the heart of the ruins of churches and religion."

This is similar to Martin Luther King's bending the arch of righteousness. This is similar to Karl Marx's "Religion is the opium of the masses," where he goes on to grant it is the heart of a heartless world, some solace in the midst of stress. The moral flow, the solace, the arch, these are *not owned* by the religions, nor are they best at promoting them. They're *built into* who and how we are as humans.

It was this sort of humanism that drew me to the Unitarian Universalist religion. I can appreciate the ancient scriptural and theological reasons for both these liberal religions, but it is the Enlightenment element in them, the "I dare to think and act for myself" that enthuses me. I use the word "enthuse" deliberately, for to live up to our free and whole selves in a just and improving community is to "have God within," God being nature alive with our unique way.

Back in seminary I was fortunate enough to join the second ever class at The Humanist Institute. There in the Ethical Culture Society building near the Lincoln Center in New York City I dove into the canon of humanist writings that seemed to speak more effectively to our human condition.

I didn't mind their predominately anti-god-talk element. To me, that's not the point. Humanism affirms our inherent rights and abilities. It trusts that we can think, care, laugh, and love fully and well, whether we're against god-beliefs or if we're believers. Believers and atheists can share the same goods, religiously.

Now that we know how long it takes to make an inch of soil we don't go washing it away so easily. Now that we know the apparent infinite forests, oceans, and air are all limited in volume and susceptible to our sudden mechanized desires, we begin to build them up rather than exploit them to extinction. We don't kill whales for our reading light any more. It hurt our conscience to do that. Nor do we need to burn fossil fuels like we used to. It should hurt our conscience to keep doing it when we know it heats us up with havoc. We don't hunt our large animals to final annihilation, because we love them and want them to live. We no longer admire and condone slavery, for all human life is worthy and full of far more potential than we earlier admitted.

As we learn to value and promote what is good in the outer world we also find, favor and savor it within. We were born to think, not be gullibly obedient. We have far more heart to know and share than our former upbringings fostered. We're far sexier, and it is good for us, than stuffy religions admit or allow. We are able to enter meditative states as a part of our daily life that were once only known to monks and gurus. We can unpack and leave behind the guilt and shame instilled in us as children and imposed by our shallow, cruel, judgmental culture. We are not fallen, competing creatures doomed to hideous hell because of our natural reluctance to believe in a preposterous divine story. *We are far better in fact and potential than any religion has ever affirmed and promoted.*

A lot of the shame, blame, and pain we humans are caught up in come from our having lost connection to what really is good. I'll use God and the Bible here to make my metaphorical point, though I don't think the point relies on either.

Whether you believe in God and the Bible doesn't matter as much as whether you know, praise, protect and promote what is good – our natural existence.

The point of the subtle deceiver tricking Adam and Eve out of their natural wholeness *isn't* that they were willful, smart, or sexy. All those *are* good, part of who we are and should be. What the subtle deceivers do is make us forget what Elohim God had created and called "good," natural existence including all life and us humans in it. Taken all together on the sixth "day" it was declared by God to be "very good." Remembering and reaffirming such natural goods goes a long way to undo the subtle confusions of the church, the marketers, the militarists, the parents, the covered, and the arrogant. "A trust in yourself is the height, not of pride, but of piety," said Emerson.

If you believe in the Bible and God, fine. Read Genesis One over and over. If you don't believe in the Bible or God, fine. Read Genesis One for a mythic overview of who we are, how we got here, and what we're to do. There is no demand for worship from this God. There is only "replenish the earth." Would that we replenish rather than waste, augment rather than exhaust. Born free and ever more able, we brim with the goodness that forms us. We are good, very good.

This mythic foundation lies before the so-called fall from grace in Eden that the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic scriptures are all based on. So does this affirmation of the natural world, the material, factual, ecological world, fit our humanist values and aspirations. Faith in us, as Americans are assured in their founding documents, is a humanistic breakthrough for humanity. Faith in us is trust direct, not mediated by popes or kings. And though it is a forgotten religious perspective, it is at the root of our American holy humanistic story, the Deist.

Deism sees God in the natural order. Scriptures and authorities may reveal truth, but more accessible and relevant is nature imbued with law and potential. By studying the great facts and laws of nature, we learn reliably about reality. We study creation, not misleading books, to find the Creator. We work lovingly with creation, co-creating with the Creator. In this sense, God is not some dead or distant primal cause. God is the interactive dynamic of reality. It's the Creator,

via all the cosmos and evolution, come to here and now Creating, especially as we add our fresh, free, authentic part. Live up to the good you are.

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