

Religion, Spirituality, and Humanism

by Jack Sechrest

Many people use the related terms *religion* and *spirituality* almost interchangeably. I would like to take a look at this set of ideas through the eyes of the Unitarian ministers and philosophers who influenced the Unitarian denomination, and wrote and signed the *Humanist Manifesto* of 1933.

In reading this first *Humanist Manifesto*, I discovered that within the brief introduction *religion* or *religious* is used thirteen times. Also, among the fifteen principles in the manifesto, I found ten that made specific references to religion. That totals twenty-three such references in a four-page document.

What did the generation of manifesto signers, committed to naturalistic humanism, have in mind, and how did they define religion? A majority of the signers were Unitarian ministers and few were tenured university professors like Roy Wood Sellars. This fact is apparently significant for both the development of humanism within the Unitarian denomination and for humanism as a philosophical movement.

The six leading humanists of the time who had the most impact on the manifesto were John Dietrich and Curtis W. Reese, who were the main force in promoting humanism among the Unitarians; Charles Francis Potter, who established the First Humanist Society of New York as an independent humanist church; Raymond B. Bragg and Edwin H. Wilson, two Unitarian ministers who were instrumental in initiating the manifesto and seeing it through the several steps of writing, revision, signing, printing and distribution; and Roy Wood Sellars, who wrote the first draft of the manifesto.

The manifesto says that “religious humanism considers the complete realization of human personality to be the end of man’s life and seeks its development and fulfillment in the here and now.”

The seventh principle of the manifesto reads:

Religion consists of those actions, purposes, and experiences which are humanly significant. Nothing human is alien to the religious. It includes labor, art, science, philosophy, love, friendship, recreation—all that is, in its degree, expressive of intelligently satisfying human living.

Curtis Reese writes, “The chief and avowed purpose of religion is coming to be the building of personality and shaping of institutions to this end.”

Charles Francis Potter says:

Humanist religion deals with the relation of

the individual to [the] power or energy resident in himself and in the universe and concerns itself particularly with the growth of the higher consciousness or the personality of man, socially and individually, believing that man is potentially able by his own efforts to attain to the complete and perfected personality to which all religions aspire.

If religion is the system of attitudes, beliefs, and practices that are directed at the building of personality and the actualization of human potential, how did the ministers who wrote the manifesto see religion relating to the spiritual or to spirituality?

Roy Wood Sellars writes:

The spiritual has made its home in man’s daily life, in his reading, his art, his thinking and his doing. Whenever there are genuine values, there is the spiritual. Is not loyalty to these spiritual values of human life coming to be the sole meaning of religion?” He further wrote, “The idea of the spiritual must be broadened and humanized to include all those purposes, experiences, and activities which express man’s nature. The spiritual must be seen to be the fine flower of living, which requires no other sanctions than its own inherent worth and appeal. . . . The spiritual is man at his best, man loving, daring, creating, fighting loyally and courageously for causes dear to him.

Finally, David B. Parke says, “Humanistic liberalism understands spirituality to be man at his best, sane in mind, healthy in body, dynamic in personality; honestly facing the hardest facts, conquering and not fleeing from his gravest troubles; committed to the most worthwhile causes, loyal to the best ideas; ever hoping, striving, and achieving.”

There we have it. The manifesto generation saw religion as that system of beliefs, attitudes, and practices that assist us in our attempt to become our best selves. Spirituality was seen as that personal quality of being aware, connected, and committed to a life of well-being for others as well as ourselves.

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