

**"Gods of the Nice Stuff"  
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden  
at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis  
August 21, 2022**

**INTRODUCTION: Generational Tweets**

Not long ago I saw a very telling and instructive Twitter exchange. The first Tweet read:

I quickly became an atheist after leaving an orthodox Christian faith. Five years later I'm open to spirituality but absolutely no organized religion.

A response to that Tweet read:

I cannot get my head around what is meant by "spirituality." Are we really talking about "spirits" in this day and age? LOL

The response came back:

For me, spirituality is embracing the unknown with a sense of awe and childlike wonder. There's plenty we still don't know about life. I'm open to the strangeness of the universe without dogma.

Now, I don't know a thing about those two Tweeters. But I've been involved with atheists and agnostics long enough to see a generational divide between the two people in this exchange.

The person expressing skepticism at the word *spirituality* appears to me to be a very typical atheist of my generation, a Boomer. Why do I think that? Because that's the old atheist line that I've heard all my life: strict materialism, yes, but a strict materialism that embraces a worldview of an imagined human intellectual progress: the Tweet says, essentially, "We thinking people are over all that now, and everyone else will be soon enough as well."

Further, that Tweet claims that any thoughts to the contrary are laughable.

The second Tweeter is also an atheist—after all, they both care enough about the subject to belong to the American Atheist Association. But notice the subtle difference between the two attitudes. The first Tweet expresses strong opposition to religious orthodoxy and organized religion. The last Tweet expresses an openness to “strangeness.”

That’s what I want to look at today. These two very different attitudes. For individuals, the difference is mostly personality. But for institutions such as First Unitarian Society, the difference matters a lot.

As a touchstone, I want to keep in mind a few lines from the Roman poet Lucretius (c. 99–c. 55 BCE)

If they decide to call the ocean Neptune, or the grain Ceres, and prefer to call liquor Bacchus, let them go on calling earth Mother of Gods, so long as they avoid infecting their minds with foul religion. (*De rerum natura*, Liber Secundus, 655-659)

### **ONE: Finding the Theistic Sweet Spot**

The point I hope to make today centers around how materialist and naturalist attitudes have changed over time. To help clarify this, I want to explore how Humanism has changed since its first popularity in the early-twentieth century.

As I see it, everything in American religion changed after the media spectacle of the State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes in the summer of 1925. The Scopes Monkey Trial, as it came to be known. That event left an indelible mark on the American psyche.

#The Scopes trial underlined for many—both religious liberals and religious traditionalists—that natural selection would be the wedge that permanently split American religious thinking into two broad—and most likely irreconcilable—camps.

The position to take was not difficult for religious conservatives: they doubled down on what at the time were called “the fundamentals,” and this became the movement we call fundamentalism:

Inerrancy of the bible;  
miracles are real;

demons cause disease;  
social conservatism, and on.

The liberal answer was not so easy to articulate. Humanists, many of whom were atheist or agnostic, doubled down on science: objective verifiability. Many Humanists became strict materialists: If you can't measure it, it doesn't exist.

Interestingly enough, both of the extremes in the argument in those days were talking about the same sort of god concept: the monarchical European white guy in the sky. Fundamentalists thought that such a concept was the only way to stay true to the bible. Humanists thought that such a concept was merely absurd.

If you were a Humanist in Minneapolis, Minnesota or a Southern Baptist in Biloxi, Mississippi, your position on the matter was fairly clear. But what if you were a Presbyterian in Cleveland, Ohio?

Or a Methodist in Minneapolis, Minnesota, for that matter.

The middle ground between those two hardline positions was a lot more difficult to articulate.

#The fallout from the Scopes Monkey Trial is still falling today! And, I hasten to add, it never was only about religion. It was about politics as well.

## **TWO: A People Without Sin**

That's what was going on with the first generation of Humanists. Fast-forward to post-World War Two American society. There was little doubt in most people's minds that technology won the Second World War. The atom bomb, yes, but also automatic bomb sights, synthetics, metal alloys, precise computer calculations, and, most importantly for the future, jet engines and rockets.

After the war, federal money poured into American universities. Science was in the catbird seat. And, not coincidentally, Humanism enjoyed its greatest popularity. So did mainline Protestantism, which more and more made its peace with science.

Gone were the days when Methodists or Lutherans described the eternal flames of hell scorching sinners forever. Gone was the jealous, angry God. In the denominations that catered to the middle classes, God became a jolly grandfather—someone who

loved His children and wanted them happy. Religious liberals began to talk about an all-powerful god of the nice stuff. "God is love!" But that position leaves a very basic question: if God is all-powerful and all nice all the time, whence cometh evil?

A neo-orthodox theologian of the time, H. Richard Niebuhr, summed up his assessment of the liberal religion of the day,

"a God without wrath  
saving a people without sin  
through Christ without a cross."

Here's the place to remind ourselves of the politics of the Scopes Monkey Trial: The lawyer for the defense was Clarence Darrow, a professed humanist, whose father had been a Unitarian minister but lost even that much faith and became an undertaker. (Some of you know that Clarence Darrow was rumored to have joined this congregation, though there is no record of him ever having attended.)

His opponent, the prosecution, was William Jennings Bryan, former Secretary of State, three-time presidential candidate, and the greatest populist politician in American history.

William Jennings Bryan was something you don't see much anymore in American politics except among African Americans: He was a political leftist who was also a sincere fundamentalist Christian.

Even though he won the court case, William Jennings Bryan felt utterly humiliated by Darrow's line of questing, and died shortly thereafter of what nowadays would most likely be diagnosed as a stroke.

What wasn't clear at the time was that progressive liberal politics was beginning to eat its own.

By that, I mean that many poor, desperate people—as my parents were, for example—need to believe in a wrathful god who will right all the wrongs of our world by throwing the rich and powerful oppressors into hell. And they need to believe that this grinding, spirit-killing world will end any day now when Jesus comes back to right all those social wrongs. A wrathful god is their only hope for justice.

The Scopes trial widened the chasm between the liberal haves and the populist have-nots. The populist movement previous to the Second World War had goals that were

closely aligned with the goals of the liberal religious Social Gospel Movement that was then prevalent among mainstream, mainline, middle class Protestant denominations. This was the coalition that would elect Franklin Roosevelt, an Episcopalian who loved the pomp of religion but had zero interest in theology.

The sunny, happy middle-class god continued to appeal to people who were succeeding in the wealthy post-war years. But many people were not succeeding in living the American dream even in those affluent times. Then, in 1973, wage growth stopped for the average American worker and went into decline.

It is no accident that the mid-1970s was the time that right-wing Christianity became central to American politics. Right-wing Christianity reversed the trend that theologian H. Richard Niebuhr had derided: "a God without wrath saving a people without sin through Christ without a cross."

Nope. The new politically conservative Christianity preached a wrathful God, a sinful people, and a suffering Christ that offered salvation . . . or else!

Liberal Protestant denominations doubled down and kept preaching their loving god and their eternity without hell, and those denominations went into a steep decline that just keeps accelerating in our own time.

And, just as liberal Christians doubled down on a happy-clappy god, many Humanists doubled down on a strict materialism.

Here's my point: Neither of those groups were reading the room. Many Americans were just getting poorer and poorer. And more desperate for any way out.

For example, take a look at contemporary American entertainment. How much of it is science fiction, fantasy, the supernatural, and so on? Escapism.

In case you haven't noticed, Zombies, and chain mail, and chainsaws are everywhere!

### **THREE: Plugging In to Pragmatism**

So: Pre-World War Two Humanism. Post-World War Two Humanism. And, now, the possibilities of a renewed, non-suburban Humanism beckon to us.

Here's the thing: #Humanism as a philosophy has the resources to face our troubled and troubling world.

It's easy to talk about the sociological effects of the Scopes Monkey Trial or the Second World War. A much quieter revolution occurred with the publication back in 1980 of a book by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*. This book created the now extremely active and varied academic field of cognitive linguistics.

What Lakoff and Johnson demonstrate in the book is exactly what the title says: we live *by* metaphors. We live *in* metaphors. We find it almost impossible to think *without* the use of metaphors.

"Up," "down," "in," "out" . . . our simplest and most common thoughts get structured by metaphors that we learn by osmosis as we live within a cultural milieu.

As Lakoff and Johnson phrase it:

Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.

And,

New metaphors are capable of creating new understandings and, therefore, new realities.

Now, for many of us Humanists, this is not a new or exotic thought, because classic Humanism—that is, the Humanism that existed previous to the Second World War—was based in Pragmatist philosophy.

#For Pragmatists, ideas are tools. A tool is "true" if it works. Truth is socially constructed. Pragmatists draw a sharp distinction between "truth" and "fact." A fact is measurable by anyone anywhere. For example, the effects of gravity are a fact. The effects can be measured.

#Truths are socially constructed. Which is why the contemporary Pragmatist Richard Rorty (1931-2007) famously said,

Truth is what your contemporaries let you get away with.

Richard Rorty died in 2007, before the rise of Trump, but many consider him prescient in that Rorty predicted the rise of just the sort of right-wing populist that Trump is.

People who haven't taken a hard look at Pragmatist philosophy shout "moral relativism! moral relativism! Postmodernism!" But Pragmatism is not that. And Rorty's statement tells us why.

Truth is what your contemporaries let you get away with.

By using the word "contemporaries" Rorty is pointing out that not only is truth socially constructed, but also that truth is the product of social construction within certain specific historical circumstances.

Again, #the Scopes trial set the pattern for the world we live in today—religion has now become politics in the United States. The populism of William Jennings Bryan is long dead and Christian nationalism has taken its place.

#The greatest and most important virtue that Pragmatism teaches us is intellectual humility. No, it's not true that everybody is right, whatever they happen to think, but it is true that reality is very different for people who are based in different cultural and geographical locations.

Truth is what your contemporaries let you get away with.

The question is how to NOT allow certain groups to "get away with" un-truths.

## **CONCLUSION: Let's Be Alive**

What does all this talk of Pragmatism and religious fundamentalism mean in the real world?

The answer is, a lot. #The early Pragmatists were intuiting something that cognitive linguistics has now demonstrated: The reality that each of us lives in is created by the metaphors we learn to think with. #Metaphors are the tools we use to create personal reality, and metaphors are introduced to us through our shared cultural values. We all co-create reality.

Therefore, #if a human being grows up in a world soaked in the metaphors having to do with a certain sort of god concept, that person is very likely to continue seeing the world through those metaphors.

Cognitive science teaches us this is true; #Pragmatism teaches us that it's natural and logical for human beings to use the tools that work for them in the reality in which they live.

The fact is, #for some, a wrathful god is what they need in order to live a fulfilling life; for others, a loving god makes sense for them in living a fulfilling life; for others, the cosmos itself is all the god they need for a fulfilling life; for others, the whole concept of any god makes no sense for them and no god is what they need in order to live a fulfilling life.

That is the "truth" as nearly as I can figure.

But, as usual with such thoughts, someone got there a long time before I did. His name was Lucretius, and he said,

If they decide to call the ocean Neptune, or the grain Ceres, and prefer to call liquor Bacchus, let them go on calling earth Mother of Gods, so long as they avoid infecting their minds with foul religion.

## **SOURCES**

William James, *Essays in Pragmatism*, Alburey Castell, ed. New York: Hafner Publishing, 1949.

Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1980.



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