

**“Four Faiths within Liberal Religion”**  
**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of San Miguel de Allende**  
**Sunday, January 8, 2017**  
**Speaker: Rev. Bruce Bode**

**Responsive Reading**

Our responsive reading this morning is written by The Reverend Dr. David Rankin, the senior minister with whom I served as an associate minister for over fifteen years at the large, liberal, and unaffiliated Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. To my mind, this series of ten statements is as fine a summation as you will find of the values, principles, and processes of the liberal approach in religion.

I remember speaking with David about the origin of these ten statements. He wrote it, he told me, as an attempt to summarize the commonly-held principles and values of religious liberals, having surveyed those who identified themselves as such.

This series of ten statements has been published in a little wallet-sized card that many Unitarian Universalist congregations provide as an introduction to visitors to their congregations.

**MINISTER:** We believe in the freedom of religious expression. All individuals should be encouraged to develop their own personal theologies, and to present openly their religious opinions without fear of censure or reprisal.

**CONGREGATION:** We believe in the toleration of religious ideas. All religions, in every age and culture, possess not only intrinsic merit, but also potential value for those who have learned the art of listening.

**MINISTER:** We believe in the authority of reason and conscience. The ultimate arbiter in religion is not a church, or a document, or an official, but the personal choice and decision of the individual.

**CONGREGATION:** We believe in the never-ending search for Truth. If the mind and heart are truly free and open, the revelations which appear to the human spirit are infinitely numerous, eternally fruitful, and wondrously exciting.

**MINISTER:** We believe in the unity of experience. There is no fundamental conflict between faith and knowledge, religion and the world, the sacred and the secular, since they all have their source in the same reality.

**CONGREGATION:** We believe in the worth and dignity of each human being. All people on earth have an equal claim to life, liberty, and justice – and no idea, ideal, or philosophy is superior to a single human life.

MINISTER: We believe in the ethical application of religion. Good works are the natural product of a good faith, the evidence of an inner grace that finds completion in social and community involvement.

CONGREGATION: We believe in the motive force of love. The governing principle in human relationships is the principle of love, which always seeks the welfare of others and never seeks to hurt or destroy.

MINISTER: We believe in the necessity of the democratic process. Records are open to scrutiny, elections are open to members, and ideas are open to criticism – so that people might govern themselves.

CONGREGATION: We believe in the importance of a religious community. The validation of experience requires the confirmation of peers, who provide a critical platform along with a network of mutual support.

**“FOUR FAITHS WITHIN LIBERAL RELIGION:  
Part I: The Identity and Unity of Liberal Religion”**

**Introduction**

Thank you for the invitation to visit with you this week and next. This is the first time for either me or my wife, Flossie, to visit Mexico, and so this is something we’ve been looking forward to over a year.

I’ve been serving a Unitarian Universalist congregation in Port Townsend, Washington for the past thirteen years, where there are several members who are acquainted with your congregation, and, in particular, Katie Franco, whose family has been so gracious and hospitable to us.

So what to talk about with you?

I decided to leave my recent politically-charged sermons home, tempting as it is use them. And, since you are celebrating your 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a Unitarian Universalist congregation – congratulations! – I thought I would talk about the role of belief in liberal religion, dividing my sermon message into two parts: first, the beliefs that form the identity and unity of our liberal approach in religion; then, secondly, talk about the diversity and plurality within that larger identity and unity by summarizing something called the “four faiths” approach in liberal religion.

**Two confusions regarding belief**

I’d like to begin by talking about a couple of confusions with respect to belief that I sometimes come across in Unitarian Universalist congregations.

The first confusion I’ll mention has to do with the understanding of what it means to be a

“non-creedal” faith, which is how we advertise ourselves.

Many times I’ve heard Unitarian Universalists, when asked by others what they believe, say – and I’ve said it, too – “We can believe whatever we want.”

I wince when I hear this (or say it myself), thinking, “Really? Can we believe whatever we want as Unitarian Universalists? Can we believe, for example, in the idea of a superior race or the idea of a chosen people?”

Or, again, when asked what we believe, I’ve heard responses like, “We don’t have any beliefs.”

And, again, I wince, thinking, “Really, is ours a religion without any beliefs? Why would anyone want to belong to such a religion?”

Actually, liberal religion has many beliefs. And one of those beliefs is the belief that how we live and how we love is more important than having shared and/or correct doctrinal understandings.

This idea was expressed in a famous statement by our 16<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian forebear, Francis David, from Transylvania in Eastern Europe, who said, “We need not think alike to love alike.”

And a more recent Unitarian Universalist theologian, Dr. Thandeka, has coined the phrase, “Love beyond belief,” which means to me two things: first, that, indeed, in liberal religion love has priority over correct belief; and, secondly, that true religion has to do with having the heart transformed so that we love and care in such a way that it can only be called “unbelievable” – love beyond all expectation. (Dr. Thandeka will be publishing a book by that title in the next few months.)

And so, putting the non-creedal approach in positive terms, we can say that we have a “covenant-based” approach to religion: “deed over creed,” “right relations over right beliefs,” or, if I might borrow from the Dalai Lama, the leader of Tibetan Buddhism, who says, “Kindness is my true religion.”

All of these phrases have to do with the belief that how we treat each other is of more importance than that we have the same doctrines.

This doesn’t mean, however, that ideas on the big religious/philosophical questions of life are unimportant. They are important, just not ultimately important. And so a non-creedal faith like ours recognizes that when it comes to the large religious and philosophical questions of life, there isn’t necessarily one final answer that we all have to hold to.

Further, we believe that it’s important to have a place where we can study and think and debate and grow into our answers. And a liberal religious organization like ours tries to provide a place where we have the privilege of addressing these questions in freedom and

with respect ...

### **Searching and finding**

... which brings me, briefly, to a second confusion regarding belief in our approach to religion, this one having to do with the idea of being searchers. But sometimes, it seems to me, we forget that the idea of searching is to find something. And so to believe in the process of search doesn't mean that we're perpetually in doubt about everything or that we have no firm convictions.

In the Responsive Reading from Dr. Rankin earlier in the service, he spoke of ten commonly-held beliefs and convictions among us. And let me give my own list of commonly-held beliefs and convictions, which have essentially to do with the embrace of what may be called a "modern world-view."

\* First, a belief that religion is a *human* enterprise engaging the perennial religious questions of our human nature, questions like: How should I live? What should I value? To what should I commit myself? What is good? How am I part of the whole, and how is the whole part of me?

\* Secondly, a belief that truth is open and available for all, and that no particular religion has the inside track or trump card – if I can still use that term – or is the one true and final faith; nor is there is a special or secret revelation granted to the few.

\* Thirdly, a belief that all peoples and cultures are on an equal footing with one another, and there is no chosen people.

\* Fourthly, a belief that all individuals have equal access and are *directly* related to the powers that be ... so that *authority* in religion ultimately rests with the individual and not with an exterior authority, such as pope, priest, preacher, council, creed, or sacred text.

\* Fifthly, a belief that reason and science are valuable tools for seeking knowledge and ought not to be set in opposition to faith.

\* Sixthly, a belief that this universe is both ancient and vast; and that our earth, likewise, is very old, having been formed out of the stardust elements of the larger universe.

\* Seventhly, a belief that we humans, along with the other forms of life and being, have evolved out of this earth and are part of it; we belong to it, and should respect it and treat it with care.

\* Eighthly, a belief that life on *this* earth is what we should attend to first of all, not a future life in another realm – "one life at a time," as the saying goes – and that we should receive our life with gratitude, and live it by the ethic of love.

\* And ninthly and finally, a belief that deed is more important than creed, that right relations are more important than right beliefs, and that we should strive, ever and always, to treat others with kindness.

### **Summary of these statements**

There are a number of other statements that get at the commonly-held beliefs and convictions of Unitarian Universalists that I don't have time to bring forward at this time. These beliefs provide the larger context in which a diversity of perspectives exist, which I will get to in the second half of this morning's message, following our special music by Javier Estrada.

## **“FOUR FAITHS WITHIN LIBERAL RELIGION: Part II: The Diversity and Plurality of Liberal Religion”**

### **Introduction**

In the first half of my sermon, I talked about the commonly-held beliefs and convictions that provide the identity and unity of our liberal faith. In this second half of my message, I'm going to explore the diversity of belief in our faith through an approach introduced to me by the Rev. Fred Campbell, now a retired Unitarian Universalist minister living near East Lansing, Michigan.

Over the course of a 31-year ministry, Rev. Campbell served eleven different Unitarian Universalist congregations – most of them as an interim minister – and discovered in his ministry that there were four basic faiths – each with various options – within the Unitarian Universalist congregations he served. He named these four basic faiths: Humanism, Naturalism, Mysticism, and Theism.

And so let me turn, now, to these “four faiths” within liberal religion, trying as succinctly and clearly as I can to get at the “core reality” of each faith, differentiating each from the others, and trying to present each in as positive a way as I can – no critique today.

You might think of these “four faiths” as four different windows, frames, or perspectives through which one might view reality. And even if you are drawn to one more than the others, it's not that the other windows or perspectives are wrong or false or that you can't appreciate them ... in a somewhat similar way, perhaps, to the different side altars or chapels that I have found in the Catholic churches I've been visiting here in San Miguel. One may find oneself attracted to a particular saint or shrine more than others.

And, please, note that the order in which I will be presenting these four faiths – Humanism, Naturalism, Mysticism, and Theism – is not meant to imply any ranking of them, either from higher to lower or lower to higher.

### **Humanism**

So, first of all, what is Humanism?

The Humanist faith locates the meaning, value, and purpose in life in the human community and the human personality. The goal and task in a Humanist faith is that of fully developing the human potential and of “humanizing” human society.

What Humanism attempts to do, to use traditional language, is to bring the “Kingdom of Heaven” to earth – a vision of love, justice, and peace for all peoples, in our time, on this earth, and through human effort and will.

And how do you bring about this vision?

Well, say the Humanists, you can’t do it without knowledge.

And what is the best method for gaining knowledge? Science – the scientific method.

Humanism has been characterized by its trust in the scientific, experimental method as the primary and best means of ascertaining “truth.”

The faith of the Humanist is a faith in this method, as opposed to faith in what we can’t be seen or tested; and as opposed to what refuses to be tested, examined, questioned, or doubted.

Thus, Humanism is also characterized by a faith in the human mind and intellect ... as well as by a belief in the basic worth, dignity, and value of human beings.

Not that the human mind is infallible, nor that humans are the center of reality; but if a better world is to be built, it is we who must do it. No gods or goddesses will come to our aid. We ourselves are the deities that we have previously seen writ large in the heavens above.

And so, say the Humanists, let *us* step up to the plate; let *us* grasp the tiller. We must plan, and *we* must build, and *we* must create, and *we* must care, and *we* must love; and *we* must leave this world and our society better for our having been here.

And does reality and nature as a whole support this human and humanizing enterprise?

For the most part, Humanism has taken the approach that the universe is *indifferent* to human aspirations, purposes, and goals. There is no perceived guiding or loving or caring intelligence that has brought us to this time and place – the evidence does not lead us that far.

Thus, generally speaking, modern Humanism takes the approach that there is no need or reason to go above or behind or beyond or beneath or within this concrete cosmos. This cosmos *is*. It is all there is. It is *self-existing*.

And so, say the Humanists: let us take *this reality* at face value. Let us operate with what we can see and touch and measure and grasp and know. Let us not engage in *meta-physical* speculation. Isn't this reality quite enough?

Indeed, it is, say the Humanists. This is it! This is all! And it is enough! It is quite enough!

## **Naturalism**

Naturalism. What is a Naturalist faith?

The Naturalist faith would not wish to deny the meaning, value, or beauty of the Humanist vision; nor is the human community unimportant in Naturalism – not at all, since this is the particular part of Nature to which we humans belong.

But what catches one in the Naturalist faith is the sense that even though one belongs to the human community by virtue of recent birth, one belongs even more to the larger community of Nature through a more ancient and primal birth.

The Naturalist faith locates the meaning, value, and purpose in life as being primarily centered in the Natural world. Nature is what is ultimate. Nature is “divine.”

Thus, in the Naturalist faith one *reverences* Nature. This is where one's heart is. This is where one's devotion and love are located. Nature is what sustains one and Nature is what one serves.

The task of life, then, in a Naturalistic faith is to appreciate, to praise, to protect, and to enhance the life of Nature.

It is out of a Naturalist faith, for example, that the philosophy of “deep ecology” arises with its strong urge to protect the “natural” life of the Earth from the “unnatural” ravages of the human form of life. Though the human species is valued as a part of the Earth, it is the Earth itself as the larger whole that is more valued.

One of a Naturalist faith may feel, more than most, the need to get away sometimes from the human world: to leave all things that have the human scent upon them and to get out to some place on our Earth where there are no lights, no sound of engines whirring, no smokestacks spewing, no sign, if possible, of any human civilization. To do this brings cleansing from human over-indulgence, clarity for what is real, and refreshment so that you can again live a truly “human” life.

Those of a Naturalist faith put the emphasis on what Nature is and what it can do. And the praise is directed to Nature as a whole, not so much to the human as a part. In this larger context and by contrast, the human enterprise is diminished and finds its proper place.

Out of a Naturalist perspective there can be an odd comfort in the experience of one's finiteness and littleness in relation to this larger reality. The vastness of time and space absolutely wipes you out; but it's okay. It's okay in the way that being in the Grand Canyon is okay. You realize as you gaze upon this "grand canyon" that one day you may be a tiny particle of the stone that makes up one of the multiple layers of this Canyon. But as you behold its grandeur and beauty, how can you raise a complaint!

And so it is that the Naturalist window on reality contains and promotes the long view of things. You understand that you are connected to a larger process, connected to the Natural life of things, their comings and goings, their births and deaths, the ebb and flow. These are but the two sides of one larger reality. One of a Naturalist faith sees one's own end in this larger context and can willingly give over the temporal and temporary body to the larger body of Nature when that time comes.

## **Mysticism**

Mysticism. What is a Mystical faith?

The Mystical faith locates the primary meaning, value, and purpose in life as having to do with a sense of union with that essence of Being that underlies and is more real than nature in our typical use of the word.

In Mysticism an individual "understands":

- 1) First, that all things are of one piece and interconnected;
- 2) Secondly, that there is an interior essence or depth dimension linking all things;
- 3) Thirdly, that this interior essence is also the root of one's own being so that one can "know" and experience this interior essence or depth dimension of reality;
- 4) And, fourthly, Mysticism finds language utterly inadequate to get at this unitive experience (though it tries valiantly, nonetheless).

Author J. D. Salinger writes:

I was six when I saw that everything was God, and my hair stood up.... It was on a Sunday, I remember. My sister was only a tiny child then, and she was drinking her milk, and all of a sudden I saw that she was God and the milk was God. I mean, all she was doing was pouring God into God, if you know what I mean.

This, I would say, is the primary feature of mystical experience. From the one side, it is subtraction: the dissolving of the distinctions between things, the blurring of the boundaries that separate things. From the other side, it is addition: the positive recognition of the fundamental identity of things, of which you are a part and which you can experience.

Modern Mysticism does not by any means deny science, its method or its value; but it operates on the notion that there is more to reality than science is equipped to handle. Reality is not exhausted by matter-energy or by what the five senses can take in.

And so, Mysticism, in contrast to both Humanism and Naturalism, *does* wish to go behind or beyond or above or beneath or within this concrete cosmos ... not necessarily so much to create another reality apart from it, but in order to say that there is more to reality than meets the eye. There is an interior essence to reality so that it consists, as physicist David Bohm puts it, of “manifest *and* unmanifest being,” of the “explicate *and* implicate orders.”

The basic theme of all mythology, says Joseph Campbell, is “that there is an invisible plane supporting the visible one.” (*The Power of Myth*, p. 71) This invisible plane transcends – goes beyond – the “pairs of opposites” that characterize the visible plane and with which the rational aspect of the human mind is occupied.

The point of Mysticism is that we humans have the capacity – a non-rational or trans-rational capacity – to identify with and to experience that invisible plane.

“*Tat tvam asi*,” say the Hindu Mystics, “That thou art.” In your most essential self, you are one with “It.” And by stilling your active, ego-oriented, rational mind, you can connect with “Deeper Mind,” or recognize the connection that is always there.

## **Theism**

And, finally, Theism. What does a Theistic faith look like in a modern world-view and within liberal religion?

First, it is necessary to let go of the “old theism,” to let go of the old deity associated with an outgrown cosmology in which the earth was the center of creation, and humans the center of the earth, and a sometimes loving, sometimes vengeful, patriarchal deity watching, directing, and intervening from the heavens just above the clouds.

That deity, as philosopher Frederick Nietzsche declared well over a hundred years ago, is dead. That is to say, that concept of God doesn’t work anymore within a modern world-view. So clean the slate and re-work your concept of God, just as we have re-worked our concept of the cosmos.

One re-working of the theistic concept is in “process philosophy” and “process theology.”

And the key idea is that there is a “purpose” and “direction” working itself out in the universe. “Creative cosmic consciousness,” if you will, is present and at work in the universe and operating in and through an evolutionary process. It’s like a forward-pushing urge in the direction of developing increased complexity, greater consciousness, and, even, moral discernment.

And we humans, as a product of this ongoing evolutionary process, are not an aberration, or an accident, or an indifferent experiment in the scheme of things; rather, we are an illustration of the cosmic direction and a clue as to what it is all about. And we can find meaning and purpose for our own lives, then, in cooperating with this ongoing process and with being “co-creators” along with “It”.

Modern Theism, like traditional Theism, is *relational* in content and approach. Mysticism has to do with identity and union with the Powers That Be. Theism has to do with relationship and partnership – with *communion*, not union; with dialogue, not identity.

In Theism, one is interested to *address* the Powers That Be, to be in an I-Thou relationship, as Jewish theologian Martin Buber put it, so that there is a line of communication and an experience of engagement and even companionship.

In the end, Theism seems to me to be a response of the heart seeking relationship, connection, and communion. It is similar to the Humanistic perspective in these ways; but, unlike Humanism, it also seeks a connection with planes of reality not visible to human eyes.

In Theism’s approach, there is something at the heart of reality that connects to our heart; something akin to our human notion of goodness and love is present at the heart of the universe and is trying to break through and manifest itself.

And, occasionally, or even more than occasionally, this reality of goodness and love does break through. And when we meet it, and when we experience it, and when we respond to it, and even perhaps help to create it ourselves; then we have connected with that dimension of reality that carves a hole in our hearts that can only be filled with Its own white fire of lovingkindness.

### **Addendum**

These are the four different basic paradigms, models, or faiths that The Rev. Fred Campbell has identified in religiously liberal congregations, and which I have found helpful with the congregation I serve in Port Townsend, Washington.

The first sermon series I gave there in the fall of 2004 had to do with these four faiths, and I found in an adult religious education class that accompanied that sermon series (also created by Rev. Campbell) that the congregation was pretty much evenly divided into these four faiths, and that this delineation of four faiths provided a language for more clearly identifying and defining one’s own perspective, as well as for understanding and being better able to communicate with other perspectives.

One more thing: It’s challenging as a minister to figure out how to address the needs of a congregation with four different basic faiths and the variations within them. A number of

times over the past years I had said to the congregation I serve in Port Townsend that if I knew I were addressing only the Humanists, or only the Naturalists, or only the Mystics, or only the Theists in the congregation; I would create very a different service, depending on which “faith” I were addressing.

Well, about seven or eight years ago, I did just that. I took a theological question – the question of God – and in another five-week sermon series, developed services for each particular faith ... so that not only was the content of the sermon different for each faith, but the entire service was different. I dressed differently, I arranged the chairs differently, I chose different kinds of music and readings, I used more or less ritual depending on the particular faith, etc. Great fun!

For further inquiry into these four faiths, I would refer you to Fred Campbell’s book, *Religious Integrity for Everyone: Functional Theology for Secular Society*.

And if you want a further elucidation on my approach to these four faiths, you can check out the two five-part sermon series on them at the website of the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship ([quuf.org](http://quuf.org)) in Port Townsend, Washington. And if you’re in the area, please stop by for a visit.

### **Closing Words**

In the time of your life, live – so that in that good time  
There shall be no ugliness or death  
For yourself or for any life that your life touches.

Seek goodness everywhere; when it is found  
Bring it out of its hiding-place  
And let it be free and unashamed.

Discover in all things that which shines and is beyond corruption.

Encourage virtue into whatever heart  
It may have been driven into secrecy and sorrow  
By the shame and terror of the world.

In the time of your life, live – so that in that wondrous time  
You shall not add to the misery and sorrow of the world,  
But shall smile instead to its infinite delight and mystery.

(Adaptation of Preface to [The Time Of Your Life](#) by William Saroyan)

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon preached by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of San Miguel de Allende on January 8, 2017.