

## **Reason and Reverence: A New Religious Humanism**

by the Rev. Dr. William R. Murry

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The red knot is a sandpiper that every year travels more than 18,000 miles from the arctic islands of northern Canada to Tierra del Fuego, at the southern tip of South America and back again stopping along the way on several Atlantic beaches. During their stay in the southern hemisphere they replace their tattered feathers in a long molt ensuring their flight equipment to be in top condition when, in February, they begin their journey north in flocks of hundreds or thousands. They stop on their way for food, always at the same beaches or marshes where they have fed for centuries. From the northern coast of South America they embark on a week long non-stop flight that takes them to Delaware Bay just as horseshoe crabs are laying eggs by the millions. There they gorge themselves in order to be prepared to engage in the next leg of their long journey – non-stop to the islands north of Hudson Bay. There in the long summer they mate and breed. By mid-July the female knots abandon their offspring and head south and a few weeks later the males follow. The babies fend for themselves until late August when they too commence their 9,000 mile journey.

Now here is the amazing thing: the young red knots by the thousands and without adult guides or prior experience find their way along the very same migration route of their parents, stop at precisely the same beaches and marshes for food and join the others at precisely the same place in Tierra del Fuego. (this story comes from *Skeptics and True Believers*, a wonderful book by physicist Chet Raymo)

How do they do it? How do they know where to go along a route they have never traveled to a destination where they have never been? Scientists can only surmise that the red knot's genetic inheritance includes a map for the journey and the instrumental

knowledge to follow it, but saying that is simply to emphasize both mystery and the amazing nature of life.

Love of nature and feelings of reverence and amazement toward it is a long tradition in America in general and in Unitarianism in particular, beginning with Ralph Waldo Emerson whose first major publication was his great essay on “Nature.” Early in the essay he writes:

“If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile. (He goes on: )

“The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible, but all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence.”

Like Emerson I love to go outside on a clear night and gaze at the sky glittering with the lights of thousands of stars most of them larger than our sun, and as I ponder the unimaginable vastness of what I am seeing and the incredible distances between the stars I am overcome with awe and amazement and with a sense of how tiny the earth is and how infinitesimally small am I, and I am cleansed of pride and arrogance.

In recent years a religious perspective called religious naturalism has been experiencing a revival. Religious naturalism says two things. First, it holds that the natural universe is all there is. The supernatural does not exist. Second, it maintains that there is religious meaning and value in nature.

What I have done in a book published a year ago is to combine humanism and religious naturalism. Humanism has of course always been naturalistic in the sense that it denies the existence of a supernatural realm, but until now it has not emphasized the religious or spiritual aspects of naturalism.

Both religious humanism and religious naturalism maintain that human beings are products of nature and natural causes. We are simply one of a prolific nature’s multitudinous creations, each unique and special, and all part of one interdependent web.

Both naturalism and humanism also maintain that we human beings do not consist of a separate entity called mind or soul or spirit temporarily dwelling in a physical body, but that human beings are a psycho-somatic unity. This acceptance of human mortality and transience leads humanists and naturalists to feel gratitude for life and a commitment to make the one life we have as meaningful and as joyful as possible.

Religious humanism and religious naturalism go together very well because from humanism comes the emphatic conviction of the value of every human being, a belief in the importance of reason and intellectual honesty, and an ethic that emphasizes love and social justice and opposes oppression in all its forms.

From naturalism comes a sense of awe and wonder and reverence and mystery in the face of life and the universe that provides a deep spiritual dimension that humanism by itself lacks.

Moreover, humanism has been too human centered and needed a deeper, more inclusive foundation which naturalism provides. And, humanism has been accused of being too cold and rationalistic, and that too is remedied by naturalism. Every religious perspective needs a story, and religious naturalism gives us a meaningful story, the epic of cosmic and biological evolution. Thus religious naturalism provides a foundation for a new, more open and inclusive humanism. In a word, humanism provides the humanistic values that naturalism lacks and religious naturalism provides the religious and spiritual aspect that humanism has lacked.

Religious naturalism not only insists that the natural universe is ultimate. It also finds religious meaning in nature. For many people, myself included, nature evokes some of the same feelings a supernatural deity evokes in the adherents of traditional religion. The unimaginable vastness of the universe and the incredible complexity of life evoke awe and reverence greater than anything I experienced as a theist. As a religious naturalist, I feel wonder and amazement at nature's majesty, beauty, complexity and power; I feel joy and comfort among its trees or by its waters and refreshed and rejuvenated from walking in its woods; I feel reverence when I ponder the incomprehensible vastness of the universe and the equally mind-boggling smallness of the

sub-microscopic world. That the universe is, in the title of a book by physicist Freeman Dyson, “infinite in all directions” is beyond my ability to imagine. I find that the more I learn about the world from modern science, the more I am in awe. That stars I can see with the naked eye are as far away as 10,000 light years leaves me speechless; that the DNA in a single cell in my body that is so small I cannot see it, if stretched out would reach from fingertip to fingertip of my outstretched arms and that there are trillions of cells in my body and that there is enough DNA in those cells to reach to the sun and back a dozen times, these facts fill me with wonder and astonishment. And the fact that the Milky Way Galaxy has a trillion stars and that the universe contains at least 50 billion galaxies and thus thousands of trillions of stars similar to our sun fills me with an amazement far beyond my poor power to describe. I am overcome with astonishment at the thought that my body consists of 10 trillion cells and that my brain contains about 100 billion neurons and 100 trillion synapses. And I am awed by the ability of non-human creatures such as the red knot. Even the immense power of nature as exemplified in earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis and tornadoes is a source of awe. That nature’s power can destroy human beings and human creations is reason for great sorrow, but it is not the result of malice, and certainly not “the will of God” as is sometimes said. We can use our ingenuity and creativity to do all we can to protect ourselves from nature’s destructive power, but we will never be entirely successful. Nature is like the Hindu godhead that consists of the creator (Brahma), the preserver (Vishnu) and the destroyer (Shiva).

For religious naturalists living in a natural environment is a spiritual experience. Freed from supernaturalism the religious naturalist can be devoted to a nature that nurtures and sustains. It is not incidental that people speak of “mother earth” or “our mother the earth.” Our ties to nature are deep and intimate.

One of the values of religious naturalism is its emphasis on the environment. Religious naturalism has a strong environmental ethic not only because of what environmental pollution and global warming will do to human beings but also because of the intrinsic value of nature.

Religious **humanism** affirms the inherent value of every human being; it maintains that all persons are ends in themselves and not means to another's ends. It holds that we humans make our lives meaningful through service and through personal and spiritual growth and by optimizing the good and opposing that which is evil. It emphasizes personal freedom and the application of critical thinking and natural intelligence in making choices and guiding one's actions. It emphasizes life in the here and now and does not expect another life after death. It upholds intellectual honesty and rejects superstition. Since it denies the supernatural, it insists that we can rely only on ourselves to establish a better world. It is optimistic about the future although this optimism is tempered by its understanding that humans too often pursue their own interests at the expense of the common good. And it finds great value in human beings coming together in religious community to deepen their understanding, support and strengthen their values, celebrate life's passages and work together for a better world.

But religious humanism needed changing, and that's where religious naturalism comes in.

To those who have pointed out that humanism is too human-centered, religious naturalism says that it is the natural universe, the cosmos, and not human beings, that is ultimate. It is the source of life, that in which we live and move and have our being.

To those who feel that religious humanism is not really religious because it lacks a basis for spirituality, religious naturalism offers our relationship with nature as the source of a deep and vital spiritual experience. The late Carl Sagan put it beautifully: "When we recognize our place in an immensity of light years and in the passage of ages, when we grasp the intricacy, beauty and subtlety of life, then that soaring feeling, that sense of elation and humility combined, is surely spiritual.

Moreover, we humanists have been criticized for being too rational to the exclusion of our feelings. We are said to be all head and no heart. But there is nothing inherent in humanism that says we have to ignore our emotions. In fact our reason and our emotions often work together. For example, I feel outrage at injustice and oppression. I get angry when I think of the millions of people without health insurance, at the debilitating effects

of racism in this country, at the injuries of poverty in the richest country in the world. Every humanist I know feels the same way, and we use our reason to try to resolve these problems. Our reasoning processes are permeated with our feelings. Our head and our heart work together.

My point is simply that the criticisms that have been leveled against religious humanism do not apply to a humanism that is grounded in religious naturalism.

Every religious vision needs sacred stories, and humanistic religious naturalism has two stories, one from its humanist side and one from its naturalist perspective.

The sacred story for the religious humanist is the story of the long struggle of the human race for freedom – the story of the struggle for political as well as religious freedom. It is the story of the struggle to abolish slavery in the ancient as well as in the modern world. It is the story of the Hebrew prophets who sought to transform Judaism from a religion of laws and rituals to an ethical faith. It is the story of Jesus who sought to free Judaism from being a religion of laws and rituals and to make it a religion of the heart. It is the story of the Protestant Reformation which sought to free religion from priestly and ecclesiastical authority. It is the story of the Buddha's reform of Hinduism and of liberalizing movements in Islam. It is the story the early Unitarians in Europe and America who insisted on freedom of belief and the use of reason in interpreting religious meaning and of the Universalists who freed people from a God of wrath and punishment to a God of love. It is the story of all those who have sought to purge religion from authoritarianism and who have fought for greater political freedom over the ages. It is the story of the liberation of the mind from superstition and from religious dogmas that foster bigotry and hate. It is the story of the men and women who have worked for equal rights for people of color and for women and for people of all sexual orientations. The humanist story is the story of all those who have worked to make human life more truly free and therefore more fully human. And it is a story without an ending as long as there are people who are not free either because of political tyranny or because of poverty and ignorance and superstition and every other form of oppression. It is a story you and I can not only tell but a story we can continue to make.

Every religious vision also needs a story that provides an account of how the world came into being, the place of human beings, and the meaning and direction of life, especially human life. The traditional stories that have sustained western culture for several millennia are no longer efficacious for many of us, but modern science has given us a new story with multiple layers of rich meaning. That story is the epic of cosmic and biological evolution.

That story is a religious story because it calls us out of our little self-centered worlds and enables us to see ourselves as part of the great living system we call the cosmos. This story gives a larger meaning and a broader ethic to our lives.

The epic of cosmic evolution is the narrative that underlies humanistic religious naturalism and that provides the individual with a meaningful worldview and a sense of belonging to a larger process. The epic of cosmic evolution that begins with the big bang provides us with a vision of the universe as a single reality, one long spectacular process of change and development, an unfolding drama, a universal story for humankind -- our story. Like no other story it humbles us as we contemplate the complexity of the cosmic process, and it amazes us when we try to imagine its magnitude. Like no other story it evokes reverence as we feel its power, and awe and wonder as we visualize its beauty. Like no other story it gives us a scientifically based cosmology that tells us how we came to be and what we are made of. "The basic elements of our bodies – carbon, calcium, iron – were forged inside supernovas, dying stars, and are billions of years old. We are, in fact, made of stardust. We are intimately related to the universe." Like no other story it teaches us that we are all members of one family sharing the same genetic code and a similar history, and it evokes gratitude and astonishment at the gift of life itself and inspiration for responsible living. Like no other story it gives meaning and purpose to human beings as the agents responsible for the current and future stage of evolution, psycho-social evolution.

The epic of evolution is "everybody's story," but it is uniquely the story the religious naturalist claims. It is a story of the creative powers of matter-energy and of the

changing and adaptive powers of living cells. It is a story of the growth and transformation of living beings. It is our sacred story.

The late Carl Sagan wrote: “A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science, might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later such a religion will emerge.”

That religion is emerging among religious liberals today. It is a religion for today’s world.

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**Editor’s Note: A Study Guide with Commentary and Reflection by James A. Jaeger immediately follows on the next page**

**Reason and Reverence**  
**by Rev. William R. Murry**  
**A Study Guide**  
**Commentary and Reflection**  
**James A. Jaeger**

The purpose of this “Commentary and Reflection” is to provide insight into the theological underpinnings of each of the Sessions in the Study Guide. It is intended as a guide to the presenter in helping to understand the purpose of the material. (See the Comprehensive End Note)

**Session 1: Humanism and the Religious Experience**

Based on my reading and experience, most people who would identify themselves as religious humanists (just as most Unitarian Universalists) come to that religious view point from somewhere else, usually some form of Christianity. Religious Humanism represents one more step in their faith development. Thus the purpose of the initial session in this class is to allow the class participants to explore their own faith development and to see where they are in relation to religious humanism. I anticipate that most people taking this class would either be those having a general interest in religious humanism, or those who suspect they might be humanists and are trying to find out if that is true.

According to Reason and Reverence, it appears that there are two central questions in the study of religious humanism. First has to do with the existence of God. For theists, the proposition seems to be how to define God. Many modern day theists have engaged in a process of moving from a personal, anthropomorphic God, a supernatural being if you will, to some more generalized universal force (with apologies to Star Wars). The modern day theists appear embarked upon a project to reclaim the word and concept of God for themselves, albeit in a form that many traditional theists (Christians, Jews and Muslims) would not recognize.

Humanists have gone the next step. While often eschewing the word “atheist” because of its many adverse connotations in contemporary American society, nonetheless most religious and secular humanists are willing to discard the notion of “God” as a moving force in the natural world. They see no evidence to prove that God exists and, at least for Rev. Murry, the idea of God conjures up several problems:

- The “Moral Problem”: If God is all powerful and all good, why does evil and suffering exist? While theists have tried to explain away this question, humanists go to its heart and conclude that since evil and suffering are real, then either God is not good or God is not all powerful, or, more likely, God is not at all. The problem of evil is more easily understood as a part of human nature not explainable by reference to an outside force.
  
- The “Epistemological Problem”: The only reliable way to understand the universe is through our senses—through an empirical method such as the scientific method. Since no one has, to this point, devised a way to “prove” the existence of God, a good case can be made for God’s non existence.

- The “Psychological Problem”: “God made man in his own image and man returned the favor.” Freud suggests that God is simply humanity’s projection on the universe of its need for a “parent” figure to protect them from the vicissitudes of life. Hence, humans create religion and God.

- The “Sociopolitical Problem”: Western notions of an authoritarian God have created a variety of political and social problems. Humanity would be better served by discarding such a religion. The initial exercises in Session 1 allow the participants to examine the degree to which they find themselves in the humanist rather than theist camps. The second part deals with the meaning of the term religion.

The foregoing discussion provides ample support for humanism in general as a philosophical outlook. How then do we get to the concept of “religious” humanism. One can certainly have a humanist outlook without being religious (see: secular humanists). The question is how to make humanism a religion—a “religion without God” if you will. Murry suggests that there are a number of definitions of religion that do not have reference to a deity. At the individual level, religion has to do with ultimate concerns or that which gives meaning to one’s life. John Dewey distinguishes between the religious—that which gives meaning to life and religion—the organized expression of religion. Dewey sees value in the religious aspects of life, while he is more dubious as to the value of organized religion—based on historical evidence. Religion (or the religious) also has to do with humanity’s encounter with the mystery—those things that cannot (yet) be explained by science. It has to do with values that we live by. It has to do with being part of something greater than ourselves and working together in community to live our values. And it has to do with gratitude for being alive. None of these concepts need presuppose the existence of a supernatural, divine being; or of a universal life for that matter. It can be seen as part of the human experience.

Thus, in the first session, the participants are challenged to first explore their own personal beliefs and second to attempt to embrace a broader conception of the idea of religion than they heretofore have.

## **Session 2: Religious Humanism: History and Current Developments**

The purpose of the second session is to see religious humanism in its historical context. In Reason and Reverence Rev. Murry conducts a brief overview of the development of religious humanism. The Study Guide attempts, through a variety of exercises, to help the participants understand this history, which is important to understanding the balance of the material in the book.

While having ancient and Renaissance antecedents, the primary source for modern religious humanism involves Enlightenment rationalism and development of the scientific method as ways to look at the world. As humanity found ways of viewing the natural world that did not require a traditional view of God to validate them, they were also free to challenge old ways of religious thought. Advances in biblical scholarship (the so-called “Higher Criticism”) suggested that the Bible was not divinely dictated. As many of the factual statements in the Bible were challenged (God created the World in seven calendar

days, the sun revolved around the earth) other parts of the Hebrew/Christian Bible could be discarded as well, including the whole notion of God. This opened the door to a broader challenge on the assumptions of the Judeo/Christian religious tradition that eventually resulted in, among other things, the Humanist Manifestos (I, II & III) and the ideas of religious humanism.

However, there were other intellectual threads that contributed to religious humanism as well. One thread was feminist. Many leaders of the early women's movement rejected traditional Christian views of God in favor of a more humanist stance. The reason is that the traditional views were used as a justification of oppression of women and denial of their legal, political and social rights. For some, like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, rejection of traditional biblical views of women was a step towards liberation.

Similarly, there was also an African American thread. While Christianity and the Christian church has (and continues to be) an important factor in the life of the African American community, there has also been an undercurrent that has rejected God since the slave owners (and their segregationist successors) cited this God and his "Word" as justifying the institution of slavery and later segregation and apartheid. For some African Americans, rejection of Christianity in favor of a humanistic approach to religion was another way to reject the oppression of slavery and segregation.

Unitarianism, and later Unitarian Universalism, with its emphasis on the intellect and use of reason in religion, was a natural religious home for those humanists who, while rejecting traditional theistic religion, felt the need for religious community where they could "worship," receive personal and spiritual sustenance (though they might not refer to it in those words) and promote their view of social justice and social ethics. Unitarianism (and UU'ism) with its tradition of openness to new religious ideas was one place where humanistic views could have religious expression. At the same time, the advance of religious humanism was just one more step in the gradual movement of Unitarianism away from its Christian roots. This was unsettling to the more traditional Unitarians and played itself out in the Humanist/Theist controversy of the 20th century.

While humanists, for a time, were ascendant, in more recent decades other religious outlooks, including eastern religious thought and earth centered religions, and a more generalized desire for "spirituality" have moved humanism from center stage, much of its impact is still with us. For example, in my view, at least six of the seven Principles have strong humanist roots and the Seventh principle, as we shall see, has a strong connection to religious naturalism. Thus, while humanism is not necessarily the dominant force in Unitarian Universalism, it remains an important influence.

### **Session 3: Humanism and Religious Naturalism**

An ongoing criticism of humanism from some quarters is that it is too intellectual and lacks a spiritual component. It is hard to see how humanist principles can satisfy the needs of someone dealing with a life crisis such as the illness, injury or death of a loved one. Furthermore, traditional humanism is too anthropocentric ("Man is the measure of all things").

While it reveres the needs of humans, it seems to leave out the rest of the natural world. In an age of climate change, overpopulation and increasing pollution of the environment, this neglect could be devastating to humans and others. Murry's attempt to respond to this criticism is to try to align humanism with the values of "religious naturalism" which he defines as an outlook that "finds religious meaning in the natural world." This is not "pantheism" which says that the natural world is God. Rather, quoting Jerome Stone, religious naturalism focuses attention "on this world to provide whatever explanation and meaning are possible to this life." It affirms that there are "religious aspects of this world which can be appreciated withing a naturalistic framework."

Humanism is certainly consistent with the values of religious naturalism. With humanism's emphasis on rationality and the scientific method, it affirms the ultimacy of the natural world. There are "laws of nature" that explain the operation of the natural world without the need for the "deus ex machina" of traditional theistic religion. At the same time, religious naturalism provides an element that has often been missing from traditional expressions of humanism—a sense of awe and reverence. While science can explain the vast universe and the intricacies of the cells of our bodies, religious naturalism allows us to have a sense of wonder that may be missing from the dry explanations of science. Murry suggests that what is sometimes called the "Epic of Evolution" provides a new religious story for humanists. Certainly the story of the development of the universe from the Big Bang and the epic of the evolution of life on this planet provide a tale of epic proportions. While each step of the process can be explained, the overall sweep of evolution is breathtaking. I would offer one note of caution in adopting this viewpoint too literally, however. In the ongoing tussle between scientists and creationists, the creationists have argued that what we call science is simply another religious explanation of life—foisted upon a gullible public by "secular humanists" who are trying to destroy the true religion. If we religious humanists are not careful, we may be inadvertently giving superficial credence to this argument. Thus I, for one, would urge caution on how far we take this notion of the Epic of Evolution as a new myth to hold together our religious viewpoint. I believe that we need to emphasize that the scientific method is the only empirical way to view the universe and that we are content to accept that method. I simply would not push the rhetoric beyond that point.

In bringing together humanism and religious naturalism, Murry suggests a religious concept he calls "humanistic religious naturalism." Having posited such a stance, it is fair to ask, "so what does this mean in the real world in which we live?" The next few chapters of the book and the remaining sessions of the class, try to address this question.

Humanistic Religious Naturalism sees humans as part of the natural world, not above it or masters of it, but rather part of it and in fact we as humans are dependent on the health of that natural world for our survival. Traditional humanism (and to some extent Unitarian Universalism) has emphasized individualism, often to the detriment of the needs of the community. While recognizing the value of the individual and the importance of individual freedom, humanistic religious naturalism places humans within the wider natural world which has the effect of assigning a greater sense of responsibility for that

world. While we are individuals, we do not live in isolation from the rest of the world. We are indeed “our brother’s keeper” but the definition of “brother” is much wider than we might once have thought.

A naturalistic view of the world leaves open the possibility of evil. However, evil is seen as more than individual moral failings. Systems can be evil and oppressive and part of our responsibility as participants in such systems is to resist the evil and oppression. Murry states “Humanistic religious naturalism acknowledges the complex moral make up of human nature” and encourages us to be “aware of the consequences of our actions” and to maximize our “beneficial actions” and minimize our “destructive ones.” Salvation in this view is not a matter of “pie in the sky in the sweet bye and bye” but rather what we do now to make this world a better place. The significance of death is not what happens to us afterwards (most humanists probably reject the idea of an after life) but rather what happened during our lives, what legacy we left to the world. By combining the ideas of religious naturalism, with its emphasis on life in this world with humanism’s rejection of a supernatural explanation for human life and its meaning, Reason and Reverence provides a blueprint for a religious outlook which has depth and breadth. It provides a sound foundation for those who wish to find meaning in life beyond consumerism and sensation, but find a theistic explanation for such meaning unsatisfying.

#### **Session 4: Truth and the Soul**

Part of the religious endeavor is seeking to find the “truth.” Unfortunately “truth” can be an elusive concept. Is the truth of a Mozart piano concerto the sequence of individual notes on a score? Or is it the overall sense one gets from the work as you hear it played by a virtuoso pianist? One can simply play out each individual note in sequence without getting any understanding of what the composer was trying to communicate. But, when a skilled pianist plays the work with his or her own interpretation, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Similarly, you can look up close at a painting (in fact on your computer you could do it one pixel at a time) and not get an understanding of it until you step back and look at it as a whole. This is the challenge for the search for religious truth where one seeks to apply reason to the enterprise. Reason lets us look at the individual pieces and understand how they logically fit together. But this may not get to the underlying whole that addresses us at a non rational level.

This failing is not limited to humanism. Traditional Christianity can be so caught up in disputes over minor issues of doctrine (see: the Trinity) that the overarching meaning of the teachings of the religion are lost.

The work of humanistic religious naturalism is to try to harmonize or balance the demands of the intellect to understand the natural world, with the ability of the emotions to help us seek meaning in what we observe. Our minds help us make sense of our observations—our hearts help us appreciate the sense of awe and wonder in what we observe. Both are necessary for a complete appreciation of the natural world. Humanist Manifesto II summarizes this nicely: “Reason should be balanced with compassion and empathy and the whole person fulfilled. Thus, we are not advocating the use of scientific intelligence

independent of or in opposition to emotion, for we believe in the cultivation of feeling and love.”

The discussion of the role of emotion leads naturally to a discussion of spirituality. As noted earlier, many of the persons coming to Unitarian Universalism are seeking a more “spiritual” faith (as opposed to those of earlier generations who were seeking a faith that is more intellectually satisfying). Responding to such religious seekers can be frustrating. It is relatively easy to understand what a “rational” approach to religion means (even if implementing it in practice is difficult) but it is harder to get one’s arms around the concept of “spirituality,” especially in a humanist context. Too often, the term “spirituality” suggests a supernatural realm which humanism explicitly rejects. While recognizing problems that humanism has with this word, Murry suggests his own definition: “As a religious humanist, I use the word spirituality to refer to a quality of life in the here and now, a quality that has to do with genuineness, depth, and devotion to values other than my own self-interest.”

Reason and Reverence suggests a framework for a humanistic religious naturalistic spirituality. This would include seeking to engage life in depth rather than at the superficial day to day tasks of living; experiencing beauty; achieving meaning from all experiences, whether “peak” or “ordinary;” marveling at the wonder and awe of the universe; and, to paraphrase Rebecca Parker, to connect with something “larger than one’s own ego.” This form of spirituality does not require the existence of a supernatural realm. Rather, it can be encountered and practiced in the here and now. In fact, one might argue that it is a more satisfying spirituality because it engages us where we are on a daily basis. We don’t have to divorce our “ordinary” lives from our “spiritual” lives. As Dewey argues, there is no distinction between the sacred and the secular in this worldview. And, Murry emphasizes that this type of spirituality can also connect us to our social justice work, so that we do not need to compartmentalize our lives.

This then brings us to the final question: How do we take the idealized concepts of humanistic religious naturalism and apply them to our practical workaday life. How do these concepts inform our ethics and ethical behavior.

### **Session 5: Humanistic Religious Naturalistic Ethics**

In this final segment of the class, the participants will explore how they can apply the concepts of humanistic religious naturalism in their day to day work and personal lives. For a religion which does not promise bliss in the afterlife for good conduct (or threaten punishment for bad) to have meaning, it must promote a system of ethical behavior during this life that will be satisfying for itself with no promise of reward or threat of damnation. There are those who suggest that without such reward or punishment, there is no incentive for people to behave well—hence the need for a religion of reward and punishment. The initial question is the source of ethical behavior. In traditional religion, especially theistic religion, the source is outside—a deity or deities. The prescribed and proscribed behaviors are described in religious writings that purport to express the will of the deity. Following the directions of those writings is the roadmap to rewards and disobedience is the path to damnation.

In Reason and Reverence Murry raises the question of whether the good behaviors are good because God proclaimed them or whether God's laws are simply a reflection of the human consensus as to the kind of behavior that is required to live together in a just society. An issue that arises from time to time relates to the Ten Commandments and whether they should be displayed in public space. The argument is that these are the source of all law. Once you get beyond the first four commandments, which are explicitly religious in nature, the balance of them, 6-10, are arguably statements of behavior that would be universally accepted. Thus, one could accept these commandments without at the same time acknowledging the theistic framework of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. If following these commandments is a definition of "good," then the answer to the question, can one be "good without God" appears to be yes.

It is suggested that without a divine sanction, one would be tempted to engage in "moral relativism" where the answer to moral dilemmas would depend on the circumstances. The only "true morality" can exist where there are absolute divine strictures that must be followed. (And from some Christian perspectives, the divine sanction may only be based on the dictates of the Christian faith.) There are two answers to this. First, as is seen across civilizations, there are certain behaviors that receive universal approbation or condemnation. Second, even Christian ethics can be relative. Relying on the same scriptural bases, abortion is condemned and war and capital punishment are applauded. And in some instances, for example treatment of women in the church or homosexuals anywhere, the only reason given for the positions taken is "that's what it says in the Bible."

Murry suggests that in reality there are three bases for ethics: rules that must be followed; a utilitarian or consequentialist approach that finds morality in what provides the greatest good for the greatest numbers; and an ethics of responsibility which are relational in that our acts must be judged by how they effect others. This latter approach to ethics is situational, but the standard by which actions are judged is absolute—will our acts help or harm others. Of course, when the same act will help some and harm others, then there is a dilemma. Our ethics will also be affected by our emotions—will our response to injustice be stronger if we are emotionally engaged?

In the chapter on "The Ethics of Humanistic Religious Naturalism" Murry moves from the realm of "Meta Ethics" to practical ethics and looks at how humanistic religious naturalistic ethics would be applied to particular situations. This discussion of ethics tends to focus on public ethics, emphasizing the individual's responsibility to the community, rather than focusing on individual "morality." Ethical behavior is seen as that which enhances others and the community rather than following a prescribed set of "rules" for good behavior. More importantly, this ethic is one that challenges us to not only alleviate the symptoms of evil and oppression, but also to take steps to root out the basic causes. This is an ethic that comes from a place of relationship, rather than from a place of dominance or direction. Working with persons with whom we are in relationship, we can work together to find solutions to the pressing problems of our time and develop methods to empower the powerless to achieve those solutions. That is the work of humanistic religious naturalistic ethics.

The book, and the class, concludes with Rev. Murry's own description of a "Religion for the Future." In the class material, we look at these concepts and compare and contrast them with the classical statements of religious humanism-Manifestos I, II and III.

#### Comprehensive End Note

**The purpose of this commentary and reflection is to provide the leader with an overview of some of the concepts outlined by Rev. William Murry in Reason and Reverence, (Skinner House Books) 2007. The reader is referred to the Study Guide itself for the portions of the book covered by each session.**