

THE FAITH OF A HUMANIST

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Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase. — Martin Luther King, Jr.

To have faith requires courage, the ability to take a risk, the readiness even to accept pain and disappointment. Whoever insists on safety and security as primary conditions of life cannot have faith.
— Eric Fromm

I feel no need for any other faith than my faith in the kindness of human beings. I am so absorbed in the wonder of earth and the life upon it that I cannot think of heaven and angels. — Pearl S. Buck

A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history. — Mohandas K. Gandhi

Recently, at a workshop on how congregations can work on social justice work, I introduced myself to a man who'd just given a presentation on working for social justice in interfaith contexts. I had on a badge saying my name and "Society for Ethical Culture." He had never heard of Ethical Culture. He'd introduced himself earlier as both a trainer and an ordained Baptist minister. We were a bit pressed for time getting to the next event at the workshop. So, when he asked what Ethical Culture was, I simply said this: "We're people who have faith in human worth." "Faith in human worth." "Oh, that's deep," he said, stepping back a moment, putting his hand to his chest, and taking that in.

Faith is one of those words that's sometimes problematic within humanist circles. Are we in Ethical Culture "people of faith"? In the Ethical movement, we've said that we have faith in the human capacity for ethical growth, or that we have faith in human kindness. In 1876 Felix Adler gave a founding address that inspired the creation of the first Ethical Society. In that address, Adler said, "The time calls for action. Up, then, and let us do our part faithfully and well." To what and to whom are we faithful?

Another early Ethical Culture Leader, John Lovejoy Elliott, said, "I have known many good people who did not believe in God. But I have never known a human being who was good who did not believe in people."

We have many members for whom a "faith in God" doesn't make sense, but do we have faith in people? Is that one meaning of the term "humanist"?

So, what do we mean by "faith" in a humanist sense? Why would we pick "faith" as one of the themes of the year in an Ethical Society?

I'm going to talk today about *my* faith as a humanist. You might have a different meaning for the word faith and maybe even a somewhat different meaning for the word humanist than I do. And maybe you

share my faith. I hope that when I talk about the faith of Ethical Culture, you'll find that some of the ideas ring true.

Humanism, in several of its meanings, has roots in the Enlightenment, which was itself an intellectual and social movement that grew out of a critique of the Western Christian church of the time. That was a time when "faith" meant "belonging to the state church, believing what the church said was true, and following the leadership of that church." The church had some particular meanings for the word "faith" that had become important in arguments even within the church, arguments which sometimes split the church internally. One was an argument contrasting salvation by faith to salvation by works.

Another argument within the church was over whether religious faith was sensitive to evidence, and could thus grow and evolve with growing understanding, or whether religious faith had to take received revelation "on faith." Thomas Aquinas, as one of the primary thinkers within the church whose ideas influenced this internal debate, contrasted faith and reason as two different paths to knowledge, two different sources of authority for beliefs and practice. Could one hold religious beliefs by faith alone, backed by the authority of God, or did one hold beliefs by reason alone? And even if one no longer could hold beliefs that the church taught were revealed truth, wasn't there a kind of faith that could keep one in the church, finding solace in the practice of religion among fellows?

For some thinkers, within the church and then outside of it as the Enlightenment loosened ties with the established church – faith and reason were in contrast, but even then, there were differences in how to handle it. If you assume that faith and reason are in conflict but have similar aims -- faith via revealed authority, or the use of human reason to test ideas by whether they're shared with others or are subject to evidence – then you might resolve that conflict by looking to revealed religion, or to scientific naturalism. Or you can assume, as some within the church did, that ultimately, they must be compatible, and therefore you look, as many theologians have done, for ways in which philosophical reasoning and naturalistic evidence proves the truth of religious belief claims. A movement within the Roman Catholic tradition calls this "natural philosophy."

A third approach is to see faith and reason as applying to different kinds of beliefs. One kind of truth can be taught in a way that is transrational, not really about logic and reason. We learn some kinds of truth through metaphor and myth, without having to think that such truth is the same as scientific truth. In this way of thinking, a fundamentalist is confused – making literal truth out of what is meant to be metaphorical. And the radical secularist is similarly confusing metaphor with literal truth. I think here of the book of children's stories that Arthur Dobrin published – stories he'd developed by telling them on Sundays at the Long Island Ethical Society. The stories have animals as the characters, exploring ethical themes. A proposal was made to support this book's use in our Ethics for Children programs, at a board meeting of the American Ethical Union, where representatives from various Ethical Societies try to share resources to grow and sustain the national movement. This proposal was opposed by one board member, because the book uses talking animals – and everyone knows, of course, that it isn't true that animals talk. That argument assumes that reason and literal fact alone are what truth is about. Years ago, I read an argument by someone in the secular humanism wing of humanism, who alleged that we should not teach myths to children because they weren't true. The magazine that printed that didn't, to my knowledge, print my response, which pointed out that the

position was kind of odd printed in a magazine funded by Prometheus Press – named for the Greek figure who was cast out by the gods for bringing light to humanity against the will of the gods.

As you can probably tell, I'm on the side that metaphor often teaches valuable truths, and that there's not just one kind of truth.

Similarly, I'm not on the side that says there's faith and there's reason and that the two are completely separate and different. For me as a humanist, I do understand myself to have certain beliefs that may or may not be literally true, and that motivate my daily life. I need them to be subject to reason and evidence – if evidence shows that they are counterproductive, then they're worthless.

For me, the word "faith" has a connotation of "beliefs worth living by." And such beliefs must be tested by practical realities. As a naturalistic humanist and social justice humanist, I don't believe that there *is* any reliable source for authoritative revelation of truth that is beyond being questioned.

So, for example, if I had faith that our Ethical Societies will continue to serve the needs of new generations without making any changes – that would be a false faith. It just isn't a productive belief to guide my living. I do have faith that it's possible – not guaranteed – that we can evolve our Ethical Societies over time. We don't take the words of Felix Adler as received truth, and he didn't want us to. Yet, his initial ideas about Ethical Societies do continue to have influence. Including this one, which was chosen to be on our society's website: "We cannot adopt the way of living that was satisfactory a hundred years ago. The world in which we live has changed, and we must change with it." That is a fluid and flexible humanist faith. To know that change happens, and we must continue to change with it.

"No gods, no masters" in a slogan that was used in the same time period as the development of the early ethical movement – though it was used primarily within the labor movement, to advocate for democratic control even of the workplace. But "no gods, no masters" also required a kind of faith – in the sense of confidence and in the sense of commitment. A confidence that humankind, together, can make sense of the world, and can find solutions. Not a confidence that it's automatic, but a confidence that we *can* do it. And – faith as commitment, because if we aren't committed to finding solutions, we aren't going to make sense of the world and solve human problems.

In ancient China, a kind of humanism evolved in Confucianism, one that, while it had some myths about origins and gods, really depended on ethical rules about living as the core of the system – or faith. One of the lesser-known parts of early Confucianism – lesser-known because it failed – was the idea of regularizing words so that each noun, at least, would have just one meaning, and each meaning would have one word. Words for concrete things were pretty easy to do that about – a chair is a chair, right? – and maybe it would be handy to not have both a sofa and a couch in our language. But as more recent linguistic philosophers have pointed out, even a chair is sometimes not all that clearly a chair. I grew up in Milwaukee, from the age of 7, and I know what a bubbler is. Unless you grew up in there or a few other select places, you call that a water fountain. In Milwaukee, a fountain is one of those more spectacular water displays, like Buckingham Fountain.

When we move to abstract words, it's more of an issue. Yes, it would be great if the word "faith" meant one and only one thing, but that's not going to happen. It's not how language works. To

paraphrase Adler's words about religion, we cannot simply assume that words mean the same as they did a hundred years ago, or in a different context. The world in which we live changes, words change and evolve, and we must change our ways of thinking and talking, too.

It would be handy if we had a language that had different words for the different kinds of faith – words all rooted in a concept of what we owe our loyalty to – whether we've made that bargain freely or we assume it's built into the universe. Faith as allegiance – what we are faithful to. Faith as knowledge of something even if there's no proof as long as there's not disproof – even if it is, in the words of one of the Christian theologians, absurd to believe it. Faith as blind faith, unwarranted even by evidence. Faith as confidence that something or someone can turn out well – as when a teacher says to a struggling child, "I have faith in you." Faith as a kind of intuition about the future potential of something, still subject to testing. Faith as something worth living by or for – "Keep the faith." "Faith in freedom." Faith as a set of beliefs or practices shared with others (we'll get to that one in a bit). If we had different words – but we don't. So, when we hear the word, we have to listen for what it means to the person speaking.

I mentioned earlier that there are different understandings even of what "humanism" means. In its earliest use in the west, it meant a tendency within the Roman Catholic tradition, to bring attention to human life on this earth. It evolved, to apply to those who have moved beyond Christianity, who don't share the traditions and don't accept the authority of the church or its scriptures. Sometimes it is used as a kind of euphemism for atheism, and more recently, more for those who are not theistic and are for social justice. There are nontheists and atheists who are followers of Ayn Rand, skeptical of those they call "social justice warriors" or of any ideas of "the common good." It can even mean those who study the humanities academically.

Even those of us who call ourselves humanists sometimes shift between these meanings. But the simplest one I know, which is about a hundred years old now, is this: human responsibility for human problems.

Human responsibility for human problems. Five simple words, with one repeated. Yet a major faith statement, really. One informed by, but not limited to, human reason.

It puts the focus, as we do in Ethical Culture, on the deed, not the creeds. If we put focus on faith and other concepts and how they affect creeds – beliefs – I think we miss the point of Ethical Culture humanism entirely. And get caught in a particularly Western Christian argument about faith and belief, even for those who've left or never were part of Western Christianity.

Instead, then, I try to think about "faith" as something about ethical living, not about metaphysical beliefs in gods, higher powers, whether there's an afterlife or a spirit world – other beliefs that we may not share.

There's another meaning of "faith" that I'd also like to consider: the meaning embodied in the concept of a "faith community." When Christians get together across different kinds of Christianity, it's called "ecumenical" cooperation. When you move beyond Christianity, there's sometimes even disagreement about whether some groups actually meet the definition of "religion," so the concept of "interreligious" cooperation has some semantic problems. The current term used is "interfaith" work –

and the meaning of “faith” was meant to be broader than just Christianity, just western religions, just those groups that consider their system to be a religion. In this sense, a “faith” group is one that shares beliefs and/or practices – and Ethical Culture would fall into the that looser category, though not without some questions. People who move from one part of the country often find that joining another Ethical Society brings a kind of familiarity – and yet, there are also some big variations between Societies.

In what way are we a “faith” group? Here, I think another meaning of the word “faith” proves most helpful: the idea of faith as commitment, as what we have allegiance to. And what is that? I would contend that it is three things – each of which we could argue about if we think it’s a belief and therefore requires rational proof – but which I think we can agree on if we think of them as commitments.

I’m specifically not going to include one that I think many of us also share: faith in human reason and reasonableness. Why? Because I think we often overdo that. We can also underdo it. If I were to have faith in human reason, it would be in the sense that Enlightenment philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft used the term: reason as what brings together head and heart, logic and emotion. Not reason as just logic, just head, denying that heart is real. So yes, I also have some faith in human reason, but also some skepticism that human reason is enough. But that’s me – not Ethical Culture. Within our movement, we have more disagreement on that, than on the three items of faith that I’m going to assert now.

First: human worth. I knew a man who used to argue against the idea of human worth because he said that, like the soul, it had no material existence. For him, if something wasn’t materially provable, it didn’t exist. The worth of a human being cannot be weighed, physically, and we can’t find it in the brain. Here’s why it’s about faith – the metaphorical kind of faith, as opposed to literal and material rationality. Worth is something we *attribute*. It’s about an action, not a concrete, provable quality in others. We have *faith* – based on human experience – that if we attribute infinite worth to a person, no matter what their value is to us or others, that we create a world that’s more the kind of world we want to live in. We don’t require in Ethical Culture that you *believe in* human worth. We do ask that in our work, you act as if it’s true, that you treat others as if they have worth. That you attribute worth to each other here and in the wider world. That’s our goal, our aspiration – even when we don’t always succeed.

What do we do, some always ask, with people who commit atrocities? Do they also have worth? My first answer is that the idea that there *are* atrocities is itself an expression of faith in human worth. Not having faith in human worth is what allows someone to define another human being as unworthy of humane treatment.

An example I like to consider is the fall of the Eastern European communist nations at the end of the 20th century. A reunited Germany put on trial those leaders of the former East Germany who had committed crimes against the citizens – Germany treated those leaders as full human beings, of worth and dignity, even while giving them consequences for their actions.

In contrast, in Romania, the anger against Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife Elena, was so strong, that they faced a kangaroo court, a quick show trial, and a quick execution, riddled with bullets – an execution that was taped and shown on television. They were buried in simple graves, and their children’s request to bury them in a family mausoleum was denied. This was done to deny them a kind of humanity – to deny their human worth. It was the last execution in Romania before the abolition of capital punishment, as if recognizing that such actions must not be repeated. Treating human beings without full respect for their worth, even if they had perpetrated what can be called great evil, is itself an atrocity. Whether we attribute worth is important not just for those who are treated humanely or badly, but important for the very structure of society and for those who might be tempted to treat others inhumanely. Treating others as persons of worth is what *makes* all of us more worthy.

Attributing human worth is a practice, an idea, we want to maintain faithfully, that we aim to make real more often, more widely. Thus, when we see evidence that black lives are treated differently than white lives in our nation, it’s important to acknowledge that black lives matter, in a nation that does not always act that way. “Black lives matter” affirms the human worth of every person, no matter what race society assigns them to, and acknowledges that there is room to grow towards that ideal of the human worth of all. “Black lives matter” is a faith statement in a society which practices otherwise. It’s not meant to be a statement about material current practice, but about aspiration and hope and values. The slogan affirms that black lives matter, exactly *against* the evidence that in our material and current world, black lives *don’t* now matter as much as white lives do.

Ella Baker, the civil rights activist of the mid-20th century, talked about the murders of civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner in June of 1964, in words made more familiar later by the music of Sweet Honey in the Rock in “Ella’s Song.” (Andrew Goodman, you might know, had his funeral services carried out at the Meeting House of the Society for Ethical Culture in Manhattan.) Ella Baker said, then, when there was far more attention to the deaths of Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner than to that of James Chaney: “Until the killing of Black men, Black mothers’ sons, becomes as important to the rest of the country as the killing of a White mother’s son—we who believe in freedom cannot rest until this happens.”

Human worth as the first of the three major Ethical Culture and humanist faith statements – and to me, the most important, the primary one. “Until the killing of Black men, Black mothers’ sons, becomes as important to the rest of the country as the killing of a White mother’s son—we who believe in freedom cannot rest until this happens.” That was a faith statement – a statement of conviction and commitment, a statement about action, an attribution of worth, one could argue even *against* evidence. Faith in a kind of freedom of the future. “Until the killing of Black men, Black mothers’ sons, becomes as important to the rest of the country as the killing of a White mother’s son—we who believe in freedom cannot rest until this happens.”

A second faith statement of Ethical Culture is that every human being is unique and at the same time connected to every other human being. Thus, both individualism – the worth of every person – and social connection – are crucial. Social justice and community are crucial to human individual thriving and are not mere collectivism. In some human communities, the community values transcend those of individuals – in Ayn Rand’s philosophy, the individual always transcends the collective – in our

philosophy and, yes, “faith,” both are interconnected and inseparable. We become more fully ourselves in community, and social justice is directed at finding ways for every individual self to unfold, develop, become its unique and worthy best.

And a third faith statement – one which is necessary, I think, for commitment to the first two – is that what we do in the world matters. Not because it earns our way into heaven, though technically we have no stance on whether heaven exists or not. We aren’t on this earth merely to learn lessons for ourselves, with the others here being props for our learning. What we do matters – and thus, also what we don’t do matters. In the words of an existential philosopher, we have no choice but to choose, even inaction is a kind of action.

So that’s my faith – as an ethical humanist. Human responsibility for human problems. Worth – and violations of worth – define what human problems are. That what we do and don’t do matters – that’s the responsibility part. Our interconnections and uniqueness are why we are all involved in both problems and responsibility. It’s a simple faith – not an easy one. I think it’s one worthy of our faith and of our faithfulness.



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We are a community striving to promote ethical living and a more humane culture. We focus on actions, not beliefs. We celebrate the joys of life, support each other through sorrow, learn together, hear speakers who are both thought-provoking and action-provoking, and also have fun.

We welcome children to be part of community and the Ethics for Children program.

We welcome adults of all backgrounds, all ages, to participate in events and to consider joining the community.

You can find out more about the Society for Ethical Culture, including a calendar of future platform addresses and programs, on the web at www.rysec.org. You can also find us on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.