A “Twilight Zone” Clip FROM THE EPISODE “The Obsolete Man” was played to introduce the sermon.

Part 1 : Was Rod Serling a humanist??  Last Sunday, when we introduced our month of sermons inspired by The Twilight Zone, we told you a little bit about the series creator, Unitarian Universalist Rod Serling. As a fan of the show from childhood, I was delighted to realize that the ideas and values I recognized from my Unitarian church school education portrayed in many of the episodes were no accident. Rod Serling had actually left his childhood faith of conservative Judaism to become a UU when he married his wife Carol, whose grandmother was a Unitarian. She encouraged the two of them to try the Unitarian Church in Columbus, not only for a suitable wedding but for a religious home. They found both. Serling never labeled himself and his theology in any way as humanist, but there is no doubt that the messages of the stories he wrote for The Twilight Zone convey humanist values – trust in reason and science, concern for justice for all, anti-racism, and a suspicion of authoritarian states and religions.

So this particular episode, The Obsolete Man, whose beginning scenes we have just witnessed, is actually both inspiring and troubling, if you are looking to understand Rod Serling’s humanism. The theme of the episode is the courage and dignity of the human spirit and the individual human being against the power of a totalitarian state. Mr. Wordsworth, the character played by Burgess Meredith, has been called before a tribunal on charges of being obsolete. The state has confiscated all books, and he works in a profession that no longer has a purpose – a librarian. If there is any human institution that might be called sacred to a secular humanist, it would be a public library. So far, we are right with Mr. Wordsworth as he declares himself to be a human being, and to be an oracle of his own truth, no matter what the state says.

But then he makes reference to God, as one of the sources of that truth that he proclaims and defends against the state, and he is challenged. Apparently this totalitarian state is not only anti-intellectual but atheistic as well. The towering figure of the Judge, played by Fritz Weaver, bullies and belittles Mr. Wordsworth and his faith, in a way that no convicted atheist who was a member of this church would ever defend, or do.

The discomfort we find with this clip has to be set within the context of the era when it was written, and describing that context will remind us how difficult it has been to be a proud and public secular humanist for the oldest generation of members of our church represented in the sanctuary today. When the Humanist Manifesto was first proclaimed in 1933, it was endorsed by a tiny minority of ministers and lay leaders even within the liberal religious denominations like the Unitarians and Universalists, and it was ignored or dismissed by most Americans. Even though humanism gradually became accepted as an authentic and welcome stance within our congregations during the thirties and forties, in the minds of the general public, the words “atheist” and “communist” became a matched set, especially during the 1950’s. Rod Serling grew up in the era of Joe McCarthy’s anti-communist crusade, and he created the Twilight Zone stories at the height of the cold war. The best known totalitarian state of the time was the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which was officially an atheistic state. So for Serling’s 1962 heroic character, Romney Wordsworth, being both a humanist and a theist is completely appropriate, and the evil state would be best portrayed as atheistic.

Much has changed in the religious landscape of America since 1962. It is much easier to be a public atheistic secular humanist in America than it was forty years ago. But it is still not unusual for atheists to be depicted as evil by leaders in some segments of our society. Whereas the current Prime Minister of Australia is an admitted atheist, it is still unlikely that such a person could ever be elected President of the United States. Among western
democracies, the United States stills polls the smallest number of people willing to identify themselves as atheists – 6% of the population according the 2012 Pew Research numbers.

So you can still feel pretty alone if you’re very vocal in your family or neighborhood about being the village atheist. That’s why Unitarian Universalist congregations since our merger into one church in 1961 have remained very important communities for atheists and secular humanists who enjoy, appreciate, and want to promote humanist values from a base in a caring community. During the sixties, it was one of the few places where you could find like-minded people and feel safe in expressing your opinions. Unitarian Universalism was so open and hospitable to humanists of all opinions that by the early seventies they were the dominant religious perspective within our congregations, especially our smaller ones. Humanists were more motivated to organize new UU congregations, and naturally, they would make them in their own image, with minimal traditional liturgy and an identity that was confrontational about the value of traditional forms of religion.

The generation that followed them, however, that came of age in the sixties and seventies, had a different range of religious experiences. They had been exposed to study and appreciation and experimentation with the world’s religious practices in a different way than any generation before them – through travel, through media, and through the immigration to America of teachers and followers from most of the world’s non-Christian faiths. The boomer generation of Unitarian Universalists was completely accepting of humanist values, but much more intrigued about the possibilities for religious practice outside of any authoritarian structure, and much more open to the metaphor and poetry of spiritual language and liturgy.

By the 1990’s, secular humanists inside the UUA were getting a little anxious as they saw the culture of their churches changing. More people were identifying themselves as humanists, but as religious humanists, in ways that secularists could not understand and found repugnant! Secular humanists outside the UUA would tell their UU friends, “See, I told you so… if it looks like a religion and acts like a religion, it’s gonna turn out to be a religion like all the others.” “Religious humanism is a contradiction in terms,” they would say. “There’s no such thing.” But it turns out a lot of Unitarian Universalists thought that there was such a thing as religious humanism – that there were ways of understanding and appreciating the universe that could not be described by science and reason that the wisdom and poetry of scripture, literature, liturgy and music could open up.

So now, despite the fact that studies of the varieties of Unitarian Universalist belief still suggest that the majority of people in our congregations continue to identify themselves with humanist religious positions, and that most of that majority would be comfortable calling themselves atheists or agnostics, many secular humanists in our congregations tell us they are becoming like the Obsolete Man; they feel their influence has declined and that their future prospects in Unitarian Universalism are dim. Some have told me that they feel like dinosaurs who have outlived their time and that their species of Unitarian Universalist religion is doomed. Outside of Unitarian Universalism, secular humanists are divided about whether the UUA is a help or a hindrance to the advancement of secular humanist values in the world.

A Dramatic Reading

Introduction by Wayne: Outside of the UUA, secular humanists have conventions! I don’t know whether you all knew that. Pretty impressive conventions, actually. There’s one coming up in just a couple of weeks in Nashville, sponsored by the people who publish Skeptical Inquirer magazine. When secular humanists get together in these conventions, one of their most important internal disagreements is whether they should accommodate themselves to being one of many perspectives on religion in a pluralistic world, and make sure that the non-theistic pro-science viewpoint is heard and understood among the world’s religious diversity – OR whether instead, secular humanists should be assertively anti-religious, aggressively confronting and challenging religion in all the forms that it appears, as a superstitious social evil that humanity should discard. Speakers and panels actively debate this issue when secular humanists gather, but the coffee shop discussions are just as interesting. So
now, we’d like to invite you to eavesdrop on just such a coffee shop conversation between two secular humanists at their convention.

Accommodationist (Anne)  The problem with you is that you act like all problems in the world will be solved if there were no religions.

Confrontationist (Wayne)  That’s right! Since the vast majority of the world’s problems have been caused in whole or in part by religious beliefs, we’d be a lot better off if we did away with religion entirely.

Acc  Well first of all you can’t lump all religions together. There’s the liberal religions like the Unitarian Universalists, who are completely different than religions such as the Church of Christ, who are fundamentalists. Churches like the UU’s welcome and represent humanist values like tolerance, diversity, mutual respect, equal rights for all, & support government neutrality around religion. Of course, I agree with you that we should be against fundamentalist religions that would impose a theocracy if they could.

Con  That’s not good enough. We waste our time hanging out in these so-called liberal religions. All religious people deny self-evident facts about the way the world is. The softhearted attachment to romantic religious language that you find among the Unitarians is way too close to “softheaded” as far as I am concerned.

Acc  What you are saying is just hurtful & alienates & insults millions of people, many of whom agree with us on lots of important values and who would defend our right to our opinions against fundamentalists of all kinds. Don’t you want people like that on our side, especially when it comes to politics? And don’t forget all the Americans who are involved in eastern faiths & people like pagans & wiccans. Because they all get attacked by the fundamentalists, there are ways that all of them could be our allies.

Con  Where have all these people been when we needed them? What help were they when we were trying to remove “In God We Trust” from our money?

    My real point is about what religion does to the mind! It prevents people from thinking for themselves. Religion gives people prefab ideas and beliefs, & prevents them from using their minds for themselves. Religion tells them what to think, what to do, what to say, And God forbid you question God! Or any religious authority figure.

    And you know very well how much religion has been behind the oppression of women, minorities, the LGBT community, & any other religion that doesn’t match your own! Religion for the most part is a brake slowing down social justice, community action & science. Historically religion has just stifled human inquiry, ever since the Pope banned Galileo.

Acc  Well you are wrong on 2 counts: first you are once again lumping all religions together, which is just wrong. But you’re also wrong when you say religion has never done anything good. It has. It has consoled millions of people when they were in pain both physically & mentally. It has provided a moral voice & a moral conscience when there was none. It’s provided explanations when there was no science. It was a light in times of darkness. I admit religion has done many bad things. Or rather, people have done many bad things in the name of religion. But you have to balance them out.

Con  Well that may be true, but I’m siding with what David Koepsell, the executive director of our Council for Secular Humanism said today. He says: “Secular humanism (must) offer an alternative to dogmatism... Science and reason have given us the means of alleviating want from a world of dwindling resources...While science gives us the means, secular humanism (must) help give us the will to apply new scientific means of bettering the human condition.. Hey – I gotta run – let me pick up the check for this. After all, I don’t have to pledge to any church.

Sermon Part 2:  So – is secular humanism really a dinosaur from the last century on its last legs, or is it a dynamo driving social change that will ultimately push institutional religion out of business? If you were to judge secular humanism’s success in the world by the number of people who subscribe to their magazines or attend their conventions in the United States, you would have to say it’s a dinosaur. Secular humanist organizations have not handled their own disagreements very well and as a result their institutions have remained weak and ineffective. Unitarian Universalist churches
probably help make that so, by attracting the loyalty of secular humanists who appreciate the community, and relish the diversity and debate that can exist within a religious community like ours.

But if you were to look outside the United States, and not at distinctly secular humanist institutions, but at secular humanist cultures, you would be tempted to say that secular humanism is not a dinosaur but a dynamo that is driving the future. The most developed and arguably successful countries in the world are the most secular – the Scandinavian countries, the British Isles and Germany, and even Canada. Compared to what it used to be, the influence of institutional religion in these countries is minimal. The churches are empty! Now even the Catholic-dominated countries in southern Europe are finding that this is happening to them. The rise of fundamentalist Islam in the Middle East and Africa is making most Western countries even more determined to avoid a strong role for religion in public life.

So looking especially at Europe, you could say, secular humanism is on the rise, although there are few members of organizations dedicated to promoting it. Even in the United States, however, David Silverman of American Atheists points out that there are more non-religious people of various kinds in this country than all of the practicing Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus combined. Besides Christians, non-religious people are the next largest religious opinion bloc in this country. So Silverman’s verdict is that the future of humanism is so bright, he’s wearing shades!

What about within Unitarian Universalism? Secular humanists who joined our congregations in the sixties because most UU’s thought exactly the same way they did about religion will continue to be disappointed in what we have become – unless they have been part of the change that has happened since then. I would describe that change in very simple terms – instead of seeing our churches as an alternative to religion, we have decided that we want to be the home for many alternative ways of being religious. There’s no doubt that if you feel like the character I portrayed in the coffee shop conversation, that any way of being religious is soft-headed and a brake on human progress, you will always feel a little uncomfortable in a Unitarian Universalist church. But if you are more interested in exploring and promoting the values that secular humanists represent, through a religious community that has a positive presence and reputation all across North America, a religious community that is usually the most important liberal and humanist voice in interfaith settings, then you will want to be part of the future of Unitarian Universalism, even if you don’t agree about every theological question with the person sitting two pews over from you. That’s because what’s not most important to us is how we label ourselves but what values we believe in and promote. When it comes to values there’s very little difference between the people in our church who go to HAFA or the UU Christian Fellowship or the Buddhist sitting group or the Great Book Discussions.

So what are some of those values and beliefs that secular humanists have long supported that they have found in common with people of many different theologies within Unitarian Universalism? I actually found many of them summarized by Mark Belletini in a sermon he wrote about the life and religion of Rod Serling – whom Belletini called the most influential American that had ever been a member of his congregation in Columbus. Here is a partial list, taken from the morals of Twilight Zone episodes that Rod Serling wrote:

1. Take truth for authority, never authority for truth.
2. Don’t imagine you personally have all the answers. Other people’s lives teach them different things, different truths. Listen carefully.
3. Prejudice kills and maims. It is neither innocent, nor easy to fight. But if you don’t fight it, you are, by definition, killing and maiming.
4. Share your abundance with others; when you hoard, you cut yourself off, not just from other human beings, but from your own humanity.
5. Don’t believe every shining, seductive, wonderful thing out there is good for you.
6. There are fools everywhere. Don’t think that whatever group you belong to exempts you.
7. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. So be very careful of what adoration you offer to power, in whatever form it takes, be it a political leader or an omnipotent child.

8. That which you call alien may prove to be very familiar one day. That which you call familiar, may actually prove to be quite alien. Don't live your life making assumptions.

9. Nobody wants to be saved, so much as they want to be loved.

10. If you don't claim your freedom, you don't have it. A gift that is never opened, after all, is never received.

This is human wisdom, to be sure, that can be found in all cultures. But in Unitarian Universalism we dare to say that it is also religious wisdom – and that secular humanists, even those who want to classify religion as simply a supernatural belief, will always have a home in our church because humanist values are so important to all of us. The day that the secular humanists among us are pronounced “Obsole” would be a day when fundamentalist religious politics has triumphed in America, and that is not an impossible scenario to contemplate. Those of us who would resist such an outcome need each other more than ever, and we need to be together in healthy and strong communities that can influence American religion and American society. This is where secular humanists need to cast their lot, to guarantee a future that all of us can live in, and live with. May it be so.