

The Great Dietrich-Sullivan Debate of 1921
The Rev. Frances Dearman
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I take my text this morning from a sermon written by the great humanist preacher John Hassler Dietrich, published in 1927: Dietrich begins,

“I am to discuss Unitarianism and Humanism although I shall devote practically all of my time to a discussion of Humanism. I have related these two subjects because Humanism is a form of religion, or perhaps I should say a form of religious emphasis, which is growing up largely within the bounds of the Unitarian fellowship. I shall speak of Unitarianism only as the natural soil for the growth of this new emphasis, for it is mostly within the Unitarian fold that we hear about Humanists. In fact just as we have Fundamentalists and Modernists in the Protestant churches, so in the Unitarian movement we have these days considerable discussion between Theists and Humanists, the only difference being that in our fellowship we have the highest regard for one another’s views and differ with perfect sympathy and understanding. The very basis of our fellowship is freedom of conviction and utterance, so there is no question of the right to preach either of these forms of doctrine from a Unitarian pulpit.”

Accordingly, let us engage the free pulpit, democracy, and procedural justice. Justice is as much about how we do, as what we do.

I’d like to take you back to some gatherings and debates in 1921. This was a time of conflicting agendas. Let’s explore what happened at a conference of the American Unitarian Association held in Detroit that year. At that time the Association included Canadian Unitarians.

Now the best way I can find to describe my understanding of the events is through the vehicle of a play in three acts. So let me set the scene....

The struggle was between traditional theism—belief in a God with whom one has a personal relationship—and an emerging religious humanism, which might describe itself as devotion to humanity and human interests. Confrontation took the shape of speeches and debate and resolutions. The implications for our Unitarian tradition included freedom of the pulpit, freedom of belief, and openness to change.

First, a prologue to introduce the people in our play. For the sake of simplicity let us focus on two characters only: the voice of change, and the voice of resistance to change.

The voice of change is John Dietrich. In 1921 he is forty-three years old. Dietrich trained as a minister in an orthodox Protestant denomination. What he learned about Darwin’s theory of evolution and scholarly biblical studies put him at odds with the religion of his childhood. He was called to face a heresy trial and was excommunicated. Can you imagine such a painful separation? Perhaps you can.

John Dietrich found new life as a Unitarian minister. Dietrich was a hot preacher. His congregations numbered fifteen hundred people. They met in a theatre. His sermons were broadcast live on radio, and published in the Monday morning newspapers. He was a prominent voice for Unitarian humanists. What did he mean by Humanism?

For Dietrich, Humanism meant that a person could be religious with or without God. It meant that human misery was not the will of God. Rather, human misery called for a human response; humans made it, humans messed it up, and humans ought to try and fix it.

The voice for resistance to change is William Laurence Sullivan. In 1921 he is forty-nine years old, six years older than Dietrich. Sullivan was an Irish Catholic priest. He was a brilliant scholar and teacher. He taught theology at a seminary. What he learned about science and evolution and biblical literary criticism put him at odds with the faith of his childhood. He fell afoul of Pope Pius the Tenth's anti-modernity oath, by which that Pope was attempting to resist new ideas and return the Roman Catholic Church to a medieval faith.

Sullivan found new life as a Unitarian minister. He had been forced to give up the priesthood rather than betray his God-given reason. But he would not give up on God. And so Sullivan served his God as a Unitarian minister, much loved by his Unitarian congregation, and highly esteemed by his colleagues.

On with our play.

Act One

It's spring, 1921, in Chicago. Dietrich has been invited to address the Western Unitarian Conference. Chicago. The West. We're a long way from Boston.

Dietrich's topic is "The Outlook for Religion". Dietrich's speech advocates letting go the concept of divine control of the universe. This is a radical stuff. Dietrich calls for humans to accept responsibility for their own destiny.

What happened next? The theistic voices of resistance condemned this as atheistic humanism. Some theists wanted humanists like Dietrich kept out of Unitarian pulpits. The theist bottom line was faith in a common God, the purpose of the church being to worship God and seek communion with God.

Some theists wanted the Unitarian Church to generate a basic creedal statement, a statement of faith, that most Unitarians believed in "the teaching of Jesus that we are the children of God, and that our religion is that of the Twenty-third Psalm, the Lord's Prayer, and the Sermon on the Mount."

Letters flew back and forth. Articles were published. Sermons thundered from pulpit after pulpit. Strong men wept. The opposed factions lumbered toward confrontation. Like great elk in the high country squaring off to butt heads, Dietrich and Sullivan were invited to address the General Assembly that fall.

It was to be atheist against theist. (Actually Dietrich was very cagey about that. He would not come right out and say he was an atheist. He would only say that it was not necessary to believe in God to be a religious person.) So traditional theist against allegedly atheistic humanism, personal piety against social betterment, and East against West.

Act Two

The great debate took place Wednesday night, October 5th, 1921, at the General Conference in Detroit.

Sullivan and his supporters came to Detroit determined to set before the conference a resolution to affirm that most Unitarians at least believed in God. The majority of the people there probably were theists. There would be the speeches, and then Sullivan and his colleagues would present his resolution. That was the plan.

Act Two, Scene One

The topic for the speeches was: "The faith that is in us." There were three speakers.

The first was the Rev. Dilworth Lupton of Cleveland Ohio, by all accounts a very nice man. He delivered a calm undogmatic expression of faith in theism. He was calm. He was moderate. He was roundly ignored. People could hardly wait for the gloves to come off and get on to the fireworks.

Act Two, Scene Two

Dietrich spoke next. He said that faith is not necessarily mystical, about hidden things. He said that faith could be about our "deepest convictions as to truth and duty." He spoke about building the Kingdom of God here on earth. He preached the social gospel. He said that a better world would be in this world, here, now, on earth, through human responsibility, with human hands.

Act Two, Scene Three

Sullivan spoke last. Sullivan said that yes, one Unitarian could speak for all. He said that the Unitarian Church must "stand for something". Sullivan developed a moral argument for the existence of God, that human conscience reflects an awareness of divine authority. In other words, our human awareness of morality, our sense of right and wrong, leads us to an awareness of the cause and authority behind that morality, namely God.

Sullivan was vehement. And Sullivan made a mistake. He attacked Dietrich personally. (The accounts I have read give no details. It's like some embarrassing family secret; people seem to shy away from the messy bits.)

But I think I know what it's about. This is speculation on my part, based on the reading I've done. The only vehemence I found when I read Sullivan's autobiography was when he spoke of Humanist non-theist preachers permitted entry to the pulpit.

He condemns humanist preachers bitterly, almost savagely. I feel his anger and perhaps a sense of betrayal boiling off the page, that after all that had been taken away from him, now they were taking away his very heart and soul. Now they were taking away God.)

So I think the issue hidden at the heart of this debate was the freedom of the pulpit. Remember Dietrich's phrase from earlier this morning: "There is no question of the right to preach either of these forms of doctrine (theism or humanism) from a Unitarian pulpit."

I'd like to stress that all that was done here, by all concerned, was done in integrity and in love. Even Pope Pius the Tenth, purging the Roman Catholic church of its finest minds and leadership, was acting out of love, trying to save something familiar and precious from new and frightening ideas.

So there we have it. Three speeches. Radical affirmations. Passionate defence. And then... And then... the speeches are over, the captains and the kings depart, and... nothing, happens. Do you remember Sherlock Holmes, and the curious incident of the dog in the nighttime? The dog did nothing in the nighttime, and THAT was the curious incident! Well, in effect, at this point, after the three speeches, nothing, happened.

Lots of wonderful nothings happened. No one got burned at the stake. No crowds rioted, no cities blazed, no armies marched to pillage and destruction, no books were banned, no princes changed their coats. No one even lost their job. It was a wonderful moment in the history of theology; two influential people disagreed radically and nothing happened.

One particular nothing happened. Sullivan chose not to introduce the creedal resolution, the statement of belief he had intended to bring before the conference. Now maybe I have it all wrong. Maybe Sullivan was just smart enough and mature enough and realistic enough to quit when he was ahead. But I would like to read it as an act of generosity on his part, a gift, an act of grace.

I would like to think that Sullivan was generous because he had been heard. His best arguments had been heard, in full. He had had full opportunity to state his case. And when he knew that he had lost the sympathy of his audience, even so he knew that he had received a just and fair hearing for his views. And so he was forbearing and generous in his turn. He held back from putting the conference through the misery of debating and

voting on his resolution. He let it go. It could have been really ugly. It could have torn the conference apart like a wolf on the fold. But he let it go.

And so ends our play He let go of his plan to demand a creedal statement. It could have been really ugly. It could have torn the conference apart like a wolf on the fold. But he let it go.

And so ends our play, and life goes on, play after play, in the great drama festival of the human community.

In conclusion, there once was a difference of opinion within our tradition that peaked in the great Dietrich-Sullivan debate of 1921. The confrontation was between theists and humanists. At issue was the right of private judgement, tolerance for diverse opinions, defence of the free pulpit, and reluctance to suffer the constraint of a statement of belief.

At the heart of the peaceful and fortunate resolution of this difference of opinion, I believe, was respect for procedural justice: justice lives as much in how we respect one another during the decision-making process, as in what decision we arrive at. Justice means being heard. Justice means respecting others in one's turn.

Justice lifts up faith, hope and love. Love casts out fear. Hope makes room for new beginnings. Faith trusts in possibilities, not certainties. Let our hearts prepare them place.

Bibliography

John Hassler Dietrich [1878-1957], 'Unitarianism and Humanism', anthologized in "Humanist Sermons". ed. Curtis W. Reese. 1927.

Mason Olds, "American Humanism". 1996.

William Laurence Sullivan [1872-1935], "Under Orders: The Autobiography of William Laurence Sullivan", published posthumously in 1944. [The proposed creedal statement, that most Unitarians believed in "the teaching of Jesus that we are the children of God, and that our religion is that of the Twenty-third Psalm, the Lord's Prayer, and the Sermon on the Mount," derives from Sullivan, via Mason Olds.]

The closing paragraphs allude to hymnal reading #416, the words of Robert French Leavens, also to an election day sermon of 1992, by F. Forrest Church, published in *Quest*, vo..LXIII, No. 10, November 2008, journal of the The Church of the Larger Fellowship at www.clfuu.org.

See also online biographies of John Hassler Dietrich and William Laurence Sullivan and many other notable UUs at the Harvard Square Library site. Dietrich's definition of religious humanism on the first page of this sermon comes from than website.