

Meaning and Difference: Pluralism Among U(U)s¹

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I. Idea

Tolerance of difference and freedom of thought have led to pluralism of specific religious belief and focus among Unitarian-Universalists. Post-Modern culture supports pluralism and relativism. Pluralism and relativism make it hard to see how to conduct rational dialogue across boundaries of values and beliefs. An aesthetic understanding of meaning, value, and interpretation offers an effective alternative. A focus on the search for meaning supported by tolerance and freedom of belief ties UUs together.

II. UU Pluralism

A. Introduction

At the 2003 meeting of Collegium Rebecca Parker presented an overview of Unitarian theological history. She focused less on our Universalist branch, but I think the major themes she cited can be found on both sides of our history. A clear theme that ran through that presentation was the idea that openness to diversity of opinion and respect for the religious opinions of diverse individuals has always been a strong element in our movement.

Near the close of that presentation she pointed out that our history of openness has naturally led toward a pattern of pluralism. We now have UU Pagans, UU Christians, UU Humanists, UU Bhuddists, and others varieties among our members and providing leadership in our congregations.

Sometimes it seems that the strains of pluralism are so strong that there is nothing left to hold us together. The question of what holds us together has become a major theme for attention within the denomination and has been taken up by the UU Commission on Appraisal.

I think that there really is something there that we hold in common beyond the name and the annual General Assembly. I also think that the present intellectual climate within our western culture works to make the diversity among us stronger and harder to bridge. This paper will try to address some of the issues that make our present diversity different from some earlier periods in our history, and it will address elements that I find giving us a degree of unity.

B. History

I will start by revisiting some of the history. My intent here is not an overall historical review. I want to look at a few examples of the way in which tolerance of diversity in religious thought functioned in the practice of our movement, and what has constituted our core identity in relation to diversity.

1. Polish Brethren

My first example comes from the sixteenth century. I'm not enough of an historical scholar

to be able to provide this on my own, but we had the good fortune of having a very fine piece of work presented in the history section at the 2003 Collegium session by Jay Atkinson.

Atkinson did a nice job of addressing the way tolerance played out in the early Polish Brethren. He notes the triad of principles that Earl Morse Wilbur enunciated as basic to Unitarianism, freedom of individual religious belief, use of reason in pursuing religious truth, and tolerance toward difference of view and practice. He then explores how these three were actually brought into balance in the practice of the sixteenth century Polish Brethren.

My principal thesis in this paper is that freedom, reason, and tolerance must be seen as conditions or values that were instrumental to a more fundamental epistemic practice within the ecclesiology of the Polish Brethren—a process of truth-seeking that was essential to their concept of salvation in the face of human fallibility. This perspective enables Wilbur's triad to be understood, not so much as a set of autonomous "leading principles," but more as a functionally inter-dependent system of relational paradigms and hermeneutic tools serving an underlying soteriological concern for religious truth.²

Atkinson referred to the key element of this epistemic practice as a principle of 'engaged dissent.' This term seems to express this principle very well. He says that it may have been influenced by developments of what has been called the 'rule of Paul:'

deriving its name from St. Paul's advice about the decorum of congregational assembly: "Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to another sitting by, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged (1 Cor 14:29-31)."³

Among the Anabaptists this principle developed into a practice of dialogue in which the participants felt that there was frequently something to be learned in the sincere exchange of views that was not present in any single view at the start.

Another possible source of development of the rule of Paul that might have influenced the Polish Brethren was the practice of 'prophecy' as developed in Zwingli's church in Zurich. A form of this practice was used by the Polish reform leader, Jan Łaski. It was a form of what we might think of as 'sermon talk back.'

Łaski instituted this sort of "prophecy" during his superintendency of the Strangers' churches in London. Its central practice was a midweek assembly (coetus) at which members of the congregation, under the guidance of deacons or elders, would respond to or raise questions about the sermon of the preceding Sunday.⁴

It is not clear if the Polish Brethren were influenced by the Anabaptists or if they developed similar practices on their own. Łaski most likely brought his own version of this practice with him when he returned to Poland in 1556.

Atkinson traces other sources of influence as well. Key to the practice of the Polish Brethren was the tension between the felt need for knowing the truth of the Gospel message, and

awareness that humans are inherently fallible and thus no one can be confident of either their own or any other individual's interpretation of the Gospel as being without error. They believed that coming to know the truth to be found in scripture was the key to their salvation. They believed that God's gift of human reason, if applied sincerely to the interpretation of scripture, would bring them progressively closer to a true understanding, and that a merciful God would reward them for such sincere striving. They also believed that they might each learn from the others within their community, and thus they were willing to attend to differing opinions and criticism of their own interpretations.

Atkinson brings out an important point. The principles of freedom of belief, use of reason, and tolerance of difference were all held in the service of the search for truth. This epistemic practice was the driving force behind these principles.

The search for religious truth among the Polish Brethren was a search for the right interpretation of the words to be found in the Bible. The Bible was accepted as the source of religious truth but a source that was not self-evident as to meaning. There was also a faith in the ability of human reason, as a gift of God, to aid in the interpretation of scripture. The joint faith in the Bible as the source of truth and in human reason as the tool with which to interpret this source, sustained their faith in mutual dialogue on questions of belief and interpretation and provided the core of common faith which held them together. This, and the belief that the community could see more clearly than any individual.

2. New England Puritans

Now let me skip ahead to the seventeenth century and some of the New England Puritans. In Alice Blair Wesley's Minns lectures from a few years back she did a nice piece on the Puritan approach to open religious opinion and discussion in the early New England churches (Lecture 1).

She goes into some detail in describing the procedure that was adopted by the citizens of Dedham Massachusetts when they wanted to establish their own church. This was in 1638. One reason that she chose the experience in Dedham was that there is a very complete historical record still available.

The people of Dedham instituted a series of weekly meetings in which they could share their ideas about religion and how their church should function. Drawing from the historical record, Wellsley describes the rules they established for these discussion sessions:

...Rule 1: They would decide before leaving each meeting what question to discuss next week. That way people were more apt to share considered thoughts.
Rule 2: Each week the host of the house would begin, speaking to the agreed upon question. Then everyone else could speak by turns. All individuals could, as they chose, speak to the question, or raise a closely related question and speak to that, or state any objections or doubts concerning what any others had said, "so it were humbly & with a teachable hart not with any mind of cavilling or contradicting." In other words, Rule 3 was: Here we speak our own understandings or doubts. No arguing. The record reports that all their "reasonings" were "very peaceable, loving, & tender, much to edification."⁵

Like the Polish Brethren, the people of Dedham were 'people of the book.' They held the Bible to be the primary source of reference for Christian study. However, they also accepted a

broader notion of natural law and common sense as a source of truth. The record shows that the questions addressed in a number of the first of their weekly meetings were more in the realm these issues. Wellsley quotes from the record:

For the subject of theses disputes or conferences divers meetings att first were spent about questions as pertayned to the just, peaceable & comfortable proceeding in the civill society***.⁶

The pattern she describes is very similar to the one Atkinson found among the Polish Brethren. There was general acceptance that there was no place to turn for an authoritative interpretation of either the Bible or natural law. The best path to understanding and truth lay in an open sincere dialogue among themselves. However, the common ground seemed to have broadened to include significant attention to 'natural law.' The enlightenment was having its influence.

3. More Recent History

Now I'll jump ahead to the nineteenth century.

That focus of common ground for diverse opinions continued with gradual change, as the Bible became subject to various forms of critical assessment. The time of Channing, Parker, and Ballou brought in the influence of critical analysis of the Bible textual material. As Channing said in his famous Baltimore sermon:

Our leading principle in interpreting Scripture is this, that the Bible is a book written for men, in the language of men, and that its meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books.⁷

Channing continues to talk about the problems of interpretation of any ancient text. A bit further along in that section he says:

...the Bible treats of subjects on which we receive ideas from other sources besides itself; such subjects as the nature, passions, relations, and duties of man; and it expects us to restrain and modify its language by the known truths, which observation and experience furnish on these topics.⁸

Clearly the status of the Bible relative to other sources of information has changed. It is still an important common reference, but the realms of science and the humanities are becoming of near equal status.

Parker introduced a new departure here. He suggested by the very title of his sermon on "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity" that not everything in Christian religious tradition was to be given equal weight. Parker said that there were some things clearly said in the Bible that were probably not true, and that there were other things that were important teachings. It now became necessary to find principles outside of the Bible to use in making the judgement as to which was which. This effectively put natural law and human reason above the Bible in order of reference for religious truth.

Parker retained a strong faith in the project of the enlightenment and in the potential for

human intuition:

It is only gradually that we approach to the true system of Nature by observation and reasoning, and work out our philosophy and theology by the toil of the brain. But meantime, if we are faithful, the great truths of morality and religion, the deep sentiment of love to man and love to God, are perceived intuitively, and by instinct, as it were, though our theology be imperfect and miserable.⁹

In the following years the Bible became gradually less important as a reference for religious thought. It tended to remain as a source of ideas, but not as a standard which new ideas had to meet. At the same time there was an ever increasing amount of attention paid to different religious traditions. It became commonplace to suggest that we could learn from any of the world's religious traditions, not just the biblical faiths.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century the common ground for liberal religion thought and dialogue was tied to a combination of scientific empiricism and radical empiricism. There were two primary core points of reference for UU Theologies and world-views. These were the enlightenment notions of reason and empiricism (Descartes, Locke, Hume and Kant), and the later radical empiricists and pragmatic amendments of these positions (William James, Peirce, Dewey, and the Chicago school of empirical theology). During the twentieth century various versions of process thought, deriving from the work of Whitehead and Hartshorne became factors in UU religious thinking.

4. Post-Modern Influence

Another strain of philosophic thought started to influence religious thinking during the twentieth century. This is what has come to be called post-modernism. It stems from two primary strains with a variety of lesser tributaries. The two primary sources are those focused around Wittgenstein and Heidegger. The Wittgenstein influence has shown itself primarily in the philosophy of the English speaking world. Heidegger's influence has been predominantly in continental Europe. Recently, this division of influence has broken down and we have crosscurrents of these patterns influencing all of western culture.

Paul Rasor has published an overview of the whole range of postmodern thought and its relation to liberal theology in a recent issue of *The Unitarian Universalist Christian*.¹⁰

Regardless of the source, the key ingredient in post-modern thought is the recognition that there are no absolute starting points or foundations for philosophic or theological thought. When we start the process of reasoning we start from a way of looking at and thinking about the world which we have already taken up. Heidegger made the point that we are always already in the world. Before we can move to reflective thought we already have some way of coping on an everyday basis. The range of everyday coping skills that get us through ordinary living involves a way of taking both who we are and what the things that surround us are like. These ways of coping are culturally given, and they set the starting place for any reflective thought that may follow.

Wittgenstein referred to this as forms of life and language games, but his point was much the same. There is a background of understanding our selves and our world that precedes any philosophic reflection. That background establishes much of what we might then take to be 'obvious truths' or starting points for reflection. Wittgenstein also recognized that this background way of dealing with the world was a cultural artifact, not a natural given.

Every claim of a sure foundation for thought is in fact founded in the patterns of life of a particular culture and in the assumptions that grow out of these patterns. When we look at the claims of the various traditional religions it is rather easy to see the truth of this insight. One group may base their religious thought of the Bible, another on the Koran, another on the Tao Te Ching, another on the Upanishads, and there are still others I haven't mentioned. In each case the foundational text has no claim outside of itself and the assumptions of its culture for its special status. Not too long ago I had a fundamentalist believer at my front door telling me that the Bible was clearly the word of God because it said so in the book of Timothy.¹¹

One of the strongest ideas to come out of the post-moderns was the questioning of the traditions of western thought. The program of the enlightenment, which was to find firm foundations in experience and human reason for our philosophic and religious notions, has been called into question by post-modern thought. Descartes' method of doubting everything that could be questioned and starting from what was clear and distinctly true was seen to in fact start from the background cultural assumptions of the west. His notion of two separable realms of the physical and the mental came out of the background of western philosophic thinking. The certainty of his 'clear and distinct' ideas was a bias in favor of certain kinds of mathematical theory. The very form in which he posed the questions had roots in prior western thought.

For both Heidegger and Wittgenstein, although with some non-trivial differences, a key aspect of this new way of thought was to look to language as a carrier of background assumptions. In the process of learning our native language and cultural customs we learn a way of looking at the world and ourselves. Language in particular carries this background into every bit of our thinking. That is one of the reasons why traditionally for fundamentalist Christians in the United States it is not just the Bible that is treated as fundamental, but the King James translation of the Bible. The more recent translations by using different language bring in a somewhat different take on the old texts and consequently on the old ideas.

Post-modern thinking tells us that we cannot read anything but a translation of a book like the Bible (even if we try to learn the original languages, we are then the translators). Every translation is influenced by the culture and language of the translator as well as by the source text. There is no way to support a claim that we know for sure we have gotten back to the original intent. Gadamer tells us that every understanding is a new understanding, and Heidegger says that every understanding is a miss understanding.

This way of thinking raises serious questions about our ability to understand each other across differences of culture, language, and religion. If a different group expresses different judgements and values how can we relate to them? Here too, our attempt to understand what they say is a form of translation, even if the source text is also in English. Do we ever really understand other cultures or religions? Can we ever claim that our ideas and/or values are in any way superior? Or are we always passing judgement from a background that is biased in our own favor? If our very language of communication and thought is infected with cultural and religious bias how can we understand and relate to any other culture or religion?

One of the ideas that comes out of post-modern thought is that different cultures and belief systems are in effect incommensurate languages. With truly incommensurate languages there is no way to achieve an accurate translation from one to the other. There are simply no terms in the second language that would adequately match all of the terms in the first language. People who come from different cultures or hold to different belief systems in effect live in different worlds. They may talk past each other, but they can never fully talk with each other.

5. Implications for UU Pluralism

That notion raises serious problems for Unitarian Universalism. How can we hope to hold diverse belief systems together within a common religious framework? We no longer have the common reference of the Judeo-Christian Bible as the Polish Brethren and the New England Puritans did. The post-modern critique has even undermined the hope that we could take an empirical approach to the world as a common reference. Our background culture and belief systems affect the content of our experience. As Aron Gurwitsch put it:

Once conceptualization and intellectualization have taken place, these achievements co-determine the structure and organization which the stream of experience will henceforth display. In other words, it is impossible to re-experience the stream again in its "pristine" purity, because the stream ceases to appear, and therefore no longer exists in this form.¹²

For Gurwitsch, conceptualization and intellectualization develop with every step of maturation within a cultural milieu. There is no such thing as uninterpreted experience and no such thing as unbiased judgement. Does our pluralism then inevitably pull us apart?

The post-moderns would seem to leave us no alternative but fragmentation, but as I have said before, there is something drastically wrong with this post-modern critique. I made the point in the paper I did on values¹³ that Thomas Kuhn¹⁴ offered both a classic statement of the notion of incommensurate languages, and a classic example of what is wrong with that theory. Kuhn argued that a new scientific theory arises out of a revolution in thought. The new system of understanding is constructed around a new paradigm, and there is no adequate way of translating the statements of one system into the language of the next. The very meaning of the terms and constructs are different. In that frame of reference there is no way to take the statements of Newton's **PRINCIPIA** and translate them into the language of Einstein's general relativity. The very meaning of such terms as 'time,' 'distance,' and 'mass' is different in the two systems, and there are no terms in either system that would allow the precise translation of one into the other.

In one sense Kuhn seems to be right. When I accept the self-imposed notions of clear and distinct ideas, and exact definitions in the systems of science, then it is true that the physics of Newton and the physics of Einstein are incommensurable systems. They are two very different systems of looking at the world, and in that sense the older text ceases to be viable. It is written, in what amounts to a different and incommensurate language.

Yet it is clear to anyone who has even a modest understanding of the two systems and their differences, that we do regularly translate between them. Even beginning students in physics have little trouble in describing which terms of the two systems are aimed at the same basic features of our ordinary experience. Kuhn could never have made his case without comparing the two systems. When we stand outside of the theoretical structures of the two systems we can describe them both as attempts at explaining the same general class of features in the world. They differ more as evolutionary steps in understanding than by a revolution in systems of thought.¹⁵

The implications of the post-modern claim that people with different belief systems in effect speak incommensurate languages would tell us that UU Christians, UU Humanists, UU Naturalists, and UU Pagans should not be able to talk with each other. Now clearly there are times when communications across such differences fail, but that is not always the case. There are many cases where people with such differing orientations work together in the same congregations and

communicate both deeply and well.

III. Meaning in Dialogue

When the conclusions we are led to by theory do not match our experience it is the theory that should change. There is clearly something wrong with the conclusion that different viewpoints are fundamentally incommensurate. I have found that by looking at the way we deal with meaning in dialogue I have been led to a different view of the nature of meaning and intention than that of traditional western philosophy. I find that this dialogue based view helps to explain and resolve some of the problems raised by post-modern thought.

In most ordinary conversation the question of meaning simply does not arise. One person speaks, the other responds, the conversation moves back and forth. All attention is directed to what is being discussed. At a conscious level it does not occur to us that we are talking in a language, and that there are possible questions as to what our words and phrases mean. We seem to be expressing meaning directly. The medium of expression is quite transparent.

Meaning becomes an issue when something goes wrong. When we say something and the other person responds in a way that makes us wonder if they heard what we said, or when we hear the other person say something and it seems to be out of line with what we thought they had been saying up until then. It is when the normal flow of conversation is broken by some question of coherence or sense that we turn our attention to questions of meaning.

The common course of such a dialogue is brief and trivial. Most of our misunderstandings are minor affairs having to do with the way we use one or two words. Sometimes however, the problem reaches further into our sense of the world. Occasionally we find ourselves dealing with serious differences in our perception of the world. When conversation then takes the turn toward meaning the ensuing dialogue can be among the most interesting and productive that we encounter. It is a detour from whatever was the original subject of discourse, and may be seen as a problem from that point of view, but it has great potential for enlarging our view and understanding of the world, of ourselves, and of each other.

A. Hermeneutic Dialogue

When there are serious problems of meaning between people they usually go along with differences in worldview, even if those differences deal with only a limited portion of a more total worldview. In my work as an engineer I frequently ran into problems of meaning when people who work in different engineering specialties tried to communicate. Each specialty has developed a particular way of talking about its own subject matter. These differences in language usually involve deeper differences in interpretation. When someone starts to deal with issues that cross between specialized areas there can be problems of understanding that show up as confusion of meaning. It is seldom possible to understand all of the terminology until the subject matter as seen by both sides is well understood, and it is also necessary to understand the terminology in order to grasp the differing views of the subject matter.

The same sort of thing happens when we encounter people who have had a significantly different pattern of life experience from our own. Before I reached college age I had lived in two different small cities in New England. At college I found that many of my fellow students were from the New York City area. Their idea of a city was rather different from mine. We had very different life experiences as a basis for understanding a whole range of concepts that had to do with urban

environment. Before we could fully understand each other we had to share some stories and experiences.

The same problem arises between people from different cultural and religious backgrounds. We each learn the meaning of terms in our language as we grow up in a particular environment, and our life experience is foundational in determining how we understand those terms and concepts. There are real differences in how we understand things, and these understandings can affect our later experiences. We do not all share the same world of experience and understanding. We do not all experience or comprehend the same *reality*.¹⁶

If I want another person to understand my meaning I have to find a way of expressing it that is properly meaningful in their reality. If I want to understand the meaning of another person I need to open up my perspective and my reality in order to be able to take in the things that they may be trying to express. In a dialogue of this type each person needs to learn something about the perspective of the other. Problems about what is true about the world cannot be properly addressed until two people have some confidence that they understand each other.

The length and complexity of dialogues about meaning may vary greatly. If two people have a great deal in common in terms of culture, education, religion, and attitude they may find that misunderstandings deal with only very limited factors. In other cases the differences may be much broader, and the meaning of an individual word may require explanations about a broad range of context. The form that any mutual understanding will take is dependent on both of the parties to the dialogue.

On separate occasions I might be involved in discussions with different people about the same idea, and in each case become involved in explanations of meaning. If the perspectives and form of understanding of these separate people are different then the course of any dialogue about meaning with them will also be different, and the form of any final understanding may well be different. If I am trying to make my use of the term "religious" clear to a fundamentalist Christian I am dealing with a very different problem from that involved in explaining my use of that same term when talking with a materialistic atheist. Hopefully the understandings I could reach with two such different people would not be inconsistent, yet they would be likely to involve at least some different elements.

When I do reach an understanding about meaning with someone, that understanding has the form "yes, Y means the same as X"; that is, we will have found some new expression related to the world of understanding of this other person, which we can both agree is a way of translating whatever it was that I originally meant. There are other cases of dialogue about meaning where I might conclude that my original statement was somehow ill-formed or inconsistent, but what I am focusing on here are those cases where the original statement stands and an understanding is reached as to its meaning. The final understanding is then a clarification of what it was that I originally meant.

There are occasions when I find myself involved in discussions with people who bring a new perspective to some issue. Their understanding of the sort of things involved is something that I have not encountered before. In a discussion of religion, a Buddhist or Confucian might bring in aspects that are foreign to most western thought. On such an occasion, the clarification of my use of the term 'religion' might involve me in areas of thought that I had never considered before. Looking at my own idea from a totally new perspective may show it in a different light. Those differences will be things that I could not have predicted before the conversation began. Yet, if I feel that we have reached a mutual understanding of what it was that I meant then that understanding must, in some sense, be included in what it was that I originally meant. In such

circumstances I am likely to discover that my meaning went beyond the explicit content of my original thought.

The term religion may offer a good example of what I mean here. When I was quite young, as best I remember my beliefs and understandings, I would have defined religion as having to do with one's attitude and/or relationship with God. A bit later I might have changed that to refer to one's relation to whatever is divine in this universe. For some people, religion has nothing to do with belief in a divine being or beings. As I encountered differing patterns among different people and cultures my idea of religion grew broader. Yet underlying all of those ideas was some vague, yet consistently intended thought that had to do with the role religion plays in people's lives. What I call religion has to do with whatever is basic to a person's sense of value, meaning, and significance in life experience and the world. It's not simply that I now define religion that way. That definition picks up an underlying theme that was there all along. There are some people who might say that my present religious orientation was "not a real religion." That would be a way of saying that it didn't fit with the way that they use that word. Yet, although my present religion does not involve God, or any other divine being, if I don't call it religion I would have to invent another word to use for it. That new word would be indistinguishable, to me, from what I now mean by religion, and from the central underlying theme that the term religion always did denote for me. There is something intended in my present sense of that word which was always intended in my use of that word, even though in my youth it would not have occurred to me that my intention could reach to where I now find it has taken me.

It seems strange to say that my meaning can go beyond my thoughts. That is certainly a far cry from describing my meaning as the proposition in mind that my words expressed. Yet, when I reach an agreement in dialogue with someone, and can say, "yes, that is what I meant," there seems to be no alternative but to accept the content of that agreement as in some way included in what I originally meant. (Using the verb, 'to mean,' and the noun, 'meaning,' in these ways may be an example of the kind of thing I am talking about. I have found that the way I already use these words suggests meaning that I had not previously thought. In this case a process of internal, self-dialogue or reflection has led to a new form of understanding.)

Any statement that I accept as expressing an understanding of what I originally meant should be accepted as part of the content of that original meaning. That means that the meaning of what I say has a potential content which reaches beyond what I have explicitly in mind when making the statement. The same is true, of course, for something that I write. Questions and agreements about meaning may arise long after the original statement. Next year someone might ask me something about an item in this text that could lead to a new agreement of understanding. Any understanding that I could possibly reach, with any possible dialogue partner, is, in some sense, a part of my original meaning.¹⁷

There are a number of ways in which this idea could be understood. It is sometimes said that in the study of mathematics, the whole of Euclidean geometry is included in the total meaning of the definitions, axioms, and rules of inference. There is obviously much that can be deduced from these things that is far from the explicit understanding of most people as they first learn them. The idea of implied meaning that is not consciously held in mind can be thought of in this way. That would suggest that all of the potential forms of expression of meaning were deductively implied by the original intent.

There may be cases where what is involved in dialogue is like that, but that is not the general case, or even typical. When two people enter into a dialogue in search of mutual understanding where there has been misunderstanding (or no understanding) I do not believe that

we can predict the form that their agreement will reach. I do not mean that we lack the necessary data to predict the results. I mean, rather, that the outcome is not predictable.

The problem is that we are not dealing with statements that lie within some single system like Euclidean geometry, or any other single logical structure. The fact that we are starting with a failure of understanding between two different perspectives means that we are bringing together two systems of understanding which do not hold identical assumptions, values, or premises. A mutual understanding between these two perspectives cannot lie wholly within either original system. If there is to be a mutual understanding at all there must be a bridging of the two perspectives in some sense.

Since we are not dealing with two parts of the same logical system, the process of putting two sets of ideas together is not strictly predictable. I may be able to predict tendencies in people or perspectives that I know well, but people can always surprise me. The results of such a dialogue are never fixed ahead of time. The process involved includes elements of creative synthesis. In the give and take of the dialogue process people make suggestions as to what will succeed in getting a particular point across. They play with metaphor and contrast; they seek for parallel or related ideas within the others perspective. These formulations can be, and sometimes will be, original inventions. The final form of mutual understanding will depend on what actually happens in the dialogue process. Meaning is not deterministic.¹⁸

B. Meaning is Not Deterministic

In saying that meaning is not deterministic I have raised a very important issue. It has been common to understand the idea of a particular world-view or system of understanding after the model of a fixed and coherent philosophic system. In that sense a systematic philosopher or theologian such as Aquinas, Calvin, Hegel, or Whitehead offers the paradigm of what it means to hold a particular worldview. The worldview held by most individuals would be less well defined, but would ideally be capable of refinement toward such a model. These paradigm systems may not be perfect, but they each aim at describing a system of understanding that is precise and complete. This notion of worldview seems to be that background idea behind the notion of conceptual scheme as that has been used in recent philosophic discussion.

The idea of worldview that underlies those examples might go back to Euclidean geometry as its ideal. In Euclidean geometry a broad range of elements dealing with space, shapes, and measurement were brought together in one systematic whole. During a long period of western cultural history it seemed that the actual structure of those aspects of our world had been uncovered and described in systematic form. It seemed possible to know the answers to all sorts of questions in those areas, and to be absolutely sure of those answers. The sense of certainty that could be achieved about some aspects of mathematics was central to the distinction that Plato drew between knowledge and opinion. It might be difficult to know which is the correct worldview, but historically it has commonly been held that if we once had the proper worldview we would be able to reach certainty about many questions.

The discovery of non-Euclidean geometries and the subsequent questioning of all *a-priori* systems of reasoning have made Plato's distinction obscure at best. We must turn to empirical tests to determine which geometric system applies to our physical world. In general, we find it difficult to discover much that would satisfy Plato's criteria for knowledge. Those few who appear certain of their worldview are matched by others equally certain of contrary views. Yet we might imagine that the problem here is one of vagueness or imprecision. The thought would be that there

is some absolute worldview (or should we say world condition) that we each see imperfectly. The effort of philosophy and theology would then be to examine our imperfect perceptions of things and strive to recognize the true system that lay behind them. The aim of philosophy, whether or not that aim is achievable, would be to discover that true system. Any worldview that claims to describe the actual state of affairs should as a minimum have the internal consistency and precision that the true system must have. In all of this it is assumed that the truth about the world has the form of a logical system, and that a proper worldview must approach this same structural form.

The post-modern approach surrenders the vision of reaching a final system of truth. It says, in effect, that we can see that there are alternative possible systems of understanding which are internally coherent, but which are not at all the same. Since there is no logical method¹⁹ that would yield a decision as to which, if any, is correct, post-modern thought says they are all acceptable within their own point of view and any decision between them must be arbitrary.²⁰

The concern with finding a logical decision method between systems of thought is based on the assumption that any true system must be a logically exact system. The assumption that a world view is at base a strict logical system, even if in the actual case it is but vaguely defined,²¹ leads to a number of conclusions. In the area of meaning and communication, this assumption, even when not explicit, leads to a number of problems. It is, I am sure, the basis for the notion that different conceptual schemes might be incommensurate. This notion is incompatible with the notions of dialogue and meaning that I am proposing. I also find that it is not consistent with the way people carry on most discussions, especially where meaning is in question.

Consider two persons involved in a dialogue about geometry where one of them interpreted the world on a Euclidean model and the other on a non-Euclidean (consider perhaps a space with positive curvature—'spherical') model. If they actually functioned from fixed logical systems, it is not at all clear how they would ever reach a mutual understanding about the meaning of the word triangle. For the Euclidean, the triangle is the simplest closed shape composed of straight lines. The sum of the angles in a triangle is always equal to two right angles. For the non-Euclidean (think of shapes drawn on the surface of a sphere) the lens is a simpler closed shape, and the sum of the angles in a triangle will not always be the same and will be greater than two right angles. For either to understand the other they would have to comprehend the idea of alternative possible geometries. That idea changes one's notion of the relation of geometry to the world, and alters the meaning of all of the geometric ideas. Assuming that these two world views were held in the form of logico-deductive systems of thought, I would be tempted to conclude that a mutual understanding would leave both of them with quite a new set of meanings. The new understandings would not be continuous with the original systems.

What I experience around me, and observe in myself in ordinary circumstances is not like this. When I first learned the subject of geometry it was being taught as if non-Euclidean geometries had never been heard of. For a while I accepted it that way. When I encountered alternative systems and the idea of curved space it did make some difference in my understanding of the world, but the change was more subtle than revolutionary. My ability to function and reason in the world in areas having to do with geometric measurement and understanding did not change significantly. Most other people that I knew picked up these ideas in much the same way. They came as an important, yet subtle shift in worldview.

C. Aesthetic Meaning

I believe that here as elsewhere, it makes sense to adapt theory in the light of conflicting data. The model of what it means to hold a worldview is in need of some revision. It seems clear that I do interpret my world in terms of some system of understanding. It is also clear that I sometimes encounter alternate views that do not agree with the way I have been putting things together. Yet this kind of difference does not seem to present the sort of incommensurability that would be suggested on the assumption that a worldview is like a logico-deductive system. There may sometimes be great difficulty in grasping just what is involved in some alternate system, but the difficulty seems more like that of finding a path through new country than bridging a flat contradiction. We do, at least some of the time, learn to understand what people from another culture are talking about. We may not agree with people who hold different beliefs, but usually we can learn to understand what those beliefs are, and such learnings do not require discontinuities in our cognitive life.

Howard Margolis²² makes the point that most human reasoning does not follow the pattern of formal logical deduction. The model of understanding that most people in our western culture assume when they talk about a system of thought or world view is something that fits well with the idea of ineffable propositions as the meaning of our statements. Propositions are exactly the kind of things of which tightly structured logical systems are constructed. Yet the way our ideas function in ordinary experience suggests that some other model should be used to describe what is happening. Margolis concludes that pattern recognition is the key to the process, and I think he is going in the right direction (Norwood Hanson had earlier expressed similar ideas about scientific theories).²³

When we make a statement or consider some belief or value, we do have some intention in mind, but I would not equate that intention with a fixed proposition. What I have in mind by the term intention is more akin to a direction of thought than to any fixed rule or definition. I might describe it as an intentional vector, or a sense of the direction in which this thought goes. With this intention in mind it is possible to evaluate various formulations, expressions, or statements to decide if they are in accord with this intention. Any formulation that passes this test can be said to be a part of the meaning of the original thought. We cannot be true to the original intention and agree to just anything, yet the intention does not bound our meaning in the way that a proposition would.

The judgement of assent that some formulation or statement is a proper expression of our intention is akin to an aesthetic judgement. It is a recognition that some new pattern or structure of expression is akin to some original form of pattern, where the intention is something like the notion of an aesthetic style. I can never define in fully closed form what it is I have in mind by the word poetry, or the word jazz in music, yet I do have something in mind when I use those terms, and I can frequently decide if something does or does not fit within those categories. There are also difficult cases, where deciding if something belongs to the category can constitute a refinement of the original intention (as in the case of religion without God).

The idea of intention that I have in mind here is something like a beam of light. It goes off in one particular direction, yet while bounded in direction it is not limited in range. I may move beyond the range of thought that was originally involved and still find it meaningful to ask if some new expression fits within that original intention. Like the modern quantum-wave notion of light, the boundaries of an intention while limited in direction are not sharp. The boundaries of an intention are always somewhat vague and tend to shade off from that which is clearly included to that which is clearly excluded.

A worldview would then be a large-scale aesthetic model or structure within which our various particular ideas all fit together in some degree of harmony and consistency. It is, quite

literally, a way of putting our world together. The parts from which it is composed are lower level patterns or structures, intentional ideas that determine how we understand several of the parts of the larger whole. The meaning of these parts has a lot to do with the larger whole of which they form a part, and yet they have an integrity and consistency of their own as structures for interpreting various kinds of experience. My idea of a triangle is a geometric figure composed of three straight lines. The further implications of Euclidean or non-Euclidean geometries become a context in which that idea can take on particular tones of meaning, but there is a core intention that is quite independent of such concerns. (Similarly, my sense of straight line precedes any beliefs about parallelism.)

I recall hearing or reading (I vaguely recall that it was somewhere in the works of Josiah Royce) that there are three stages in the process of learning the meaning of a word. In the first stage we discover to which of the things or circumstances in our current range of experience the word applies (“which of the machines parked out front do people call automobiles?”) In the second stage we can correctly apply the word to a new experience or circumstance (“Oh look, there’s a new kind of automobile.”) In the third stage we can give a definition for the word (“A four wheeled, motorized vehicle, designed primarily for carrying passengers.”) It is commonly thought that only at the third stage do we truly understand a given word. Yet, when I look at ordinary experience the third stage is actually rather unstable compared to the second (what do you call a Morgan Three Wheeler?), and for many common words most people would be hard put to come up with a definition.

Certainly most people in our culture know the meaning of the words ‘dog’ and ‘cat.’ I feel quite confident that I can recognize which is which, and so can most people I know. I’ll be damned if I can give a definition of the word ‘dog’ that will clearly exclude cats and not distort my own understanding. I find that most people are equally unable to give such a definition. Even the definitions of these words given in my desk dictionary are virtually indistinguishable (they are both defined as domesticated carnivores that are found in a variety of breeds). To say that most people do not know the meaning of these words (and a lot of other words that would fall into the same circumstances) seems to distort what it means to know a meaning.

One of the strengths of ordinary language lies in the fact meanings are not fixed by dictionary definitions. If our ordinary systems of understanding were similar to Euclidean geometry it would be possible to generate precise dictionary definitions of most words. In common usage however, our understandings of such words as ‘point,’ ‘line,’ ‘triangle,’ ‘parallel,’ etc. are more flexible than the limited usage of these terms in a geometry text. That greater flexibility is what allows us to accept the discovery of non-Euclidean geometries without major revolutions in ordinary understanding. It is also what allows a non-theistic Unitarian Universalist, such as myself, to achieve understanding with both a Catholic theologian and a Buddhist teacher.

A formal theoretical system is a structure of thought in which we have chosen to apply strict limitations of meaning. These limitations allow certain types of deduction, measurement, prediction, and verification that would not be possible otherwise. The formal system lies within the range of some more general intention that might be formulated in ordinary language. A full understanding involves aspects of both the formal system and the more general intention. When the formal system fails it is the broader system of intention that guides the effort at formulating a new system. The same sort of relation holds for the relation between formal systems of theology and the religious traditions in which they arise. The formal system is derivative and secondary, although sometimes very useful.

Meanings, as we encounter them in more ordinary circumstances, are not strictly deterministic. The intention that I express by my words may be found to have meaning that I in no

way do, or can, now fully anticipate. The process involved in explicating meaning is best observed in cases of dialogue that involve such questions. It is a process that seems akin to aesthetic judgement, or pattern recognition.

As we can see in our command of such simple words as 'dog' and 'cat,' even ordinary language is a secondary structure as regards meaning. There seems to be an intention in mind that precedes any expression in language. We know perfectly well what we mean, whether or not we can explain it. Similarly in the case of translation, there is a sense of what is intended by the words in one language such that we can judge the adequacy of its translation into a second language. No one formulation is ever a complete and final expression of an intention, however. The expression of the intention in another language, or in a different set of words is liable to pick up some aspect or nuance of the original that is vague in the original expression. Any expression is, at best, an approximation to what is intended. Expressing ideas clearly is, and always has been, more of an art than a science.

When we take formal logical systems as the model for what it means to understand we limit the notion of understanding in ways that distort ordinary experience. My 'understanding' includes a feeling for poetic expression, a sense of musical form, and a feeling for various visual arts (in my case those aspects of my understanding could be better). My sense of values is similarly founded in aesthetic sensitivity. The whole sense of 'understanding' has been diminished in both modern and post-modern thought such that we have divorced the arts and our sense of ethics and meaning from what we take as formal understanding. That is why our culture has diminished the role of art, ethics, and politics (as the art of 'good' government) in our systems of education.

The intentions that stand behind ordinary language are akin to the way we put our world together in conscious experience. We encounter things, scenes, and events that have structure, and that structure is part of what I have called our system of interpretation. Meaning, even in its most abstract forms, is continuous with the intentional structures by which every conscious animal puts their world together in experience.

When we look at a different culture or religious faith we are looking at a different way of putting our world together. That is why the post-modern notion that different cultures can be seen as different conceptual schemes makes sense at all. There is much about the felt quality of difference that we encounter that fits with such a description. But the focus on the conceptual character of such positions is misleading. Clearly they have a conceptual nature but that is not the core of any way of grasping our world. The conceptual structure comes second. We struggle to get it right. We have a feeling of how things are and we work at finding an adequate expression for that in conceptual terms.

We all live in the same world and we humans all share a basic human nature. Just how much of our ways of being and feeling are due to that common nature and how much is influenced by our various cultures and beliefs is a question we struggle to answer. At a coarse level we have no trouble in distinguishing human nature from that of any other living being. We know that there are substantial differences between our pets and ourselves or between non-human higher primates and ourselves, even if we struggle to define those differences in detail. Our different ways of putting our world together do all stem from our human encounter with this same world. With effort, attention, and openness we can and sometimes do succeed in understanding each other across these differences.

D. Implications for UU Pluralism

Within our UU religious orientation I think we can and should still learn from the Polish Brethren and the New England Puritans who went before us. There is very good reason to believe that we humans do not have any direct access to the true nature of things. We are limited if not depraved. We struggle to get a grasp on this world and ourselves and our understandings, like ourselves, are always fallible.

We can and should be open to learn from each other and from others outside of our tradition. Like the earlier members of our liberal religious tradition, our freedom of belief, our tolerance of difference, and our use of our understanding and reason should be in the service of our search for truer understanding. It is not just freedom, tolerance, and reason that identify us; it is rather the never-ending search for religious truth which those principles serve.

Look again at the pluralism amongst us. We find UU Pagans, UU Christians, UU Buddhists, UU Humanists etc. The second term in each of these names points us toward a particular way of grasping meaning and value in our world. The first term, Unitarian Universalist also has meaning. I believe that it denotes the fact that the UU Whatever does not hold that second term position as being beyond question. All of the UUs I know, while holding strongly to their own beliefs, also are willing to listen to my beliefs and those of others. They are willing to take the effort to try to grasp where a different belief system might lead, and they are even willing to learn from others. While that attitude is sometimes found in other religious groups it is, I would suggest, basic to the UU perspective. It is the acceptance that we are always fallible, that our present beliefs are always corrigible, and that it is worthwhile to search for a better understanding that seems to define who we are.

If we realize that these different belief structures are systems, not just specific discrete opinions, we will be more successful in our attempts at understanding and dialogue. We may at times try to capture the essence of a particular belief structure in a few statements but that seldom reflects the whole. When we adopt a structure of belief, even tentatively, it involves a way of interpreting and relating to the whole spectrum of our experience. A UU Christian is likely to see a spiritual dimension that is somewhat hidden from the surface experiences of life but that is the locus of the most important dimension of life. A UU naturalist, such as myself, is likely to find that there is a depth of meaning within the processes of this natural world which is far richer than a scientific approach to the same area would realize. A UU Buddhist is likely to see a surface illusion of substantial entities that masks a deeper pattern of uniformity across the various processes of life and experience. In each case, sentences such as the above, only touch the surface of what is meant. To reach a depth understanding of these positions requires an open effort of study and/or dialogue. We do not understand each other when we stay at the easy capsule level of expression.

However, our positions and beliefs are not closed to each other. Engaged dissent, as Jay Atkinson found it in his study of the Polish Brethren, or an open and respectful dialogue, such as Alice Blair Wesley found in Puritan New England, is still the right prescription for our search for enlightenment. We none of us possess any special insight into the truth. Rather we each struggle to put some structure of understanding, meaning, and value to our experience. None of our interpretations are ever final and we can all learn through exposure to differing perspectives.

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- ¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the October 2004 meeting of Collegium at Craigville Beach, MA.
- ² Atkinson, Jay, "Epistemic Attitudes and Practice in the Ecclesiology of the Polish Brethren," unpublished typescript, private collection, 2.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ⁵ Wesley, Alice Blair, "Lecture 1: Love is the Doctrine of this Church," *The Minns 2000-01 Lectures: The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church: The Spirit and the Promise of Our Covenant* (Chicago: Meadville-Lombard Press, 2002); available on-line at http://www.meadville.edu/journal/2001_lecture1_2_2.pdf, accessed March 31, 2006.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ Channing, William Ellery, "Unitarian Christianity" (sermon delivered at the ordination of Rev. Jared Sparks First in Independent Church of Baltimore, Baltimore, Maryland, 5 May 1819); available on-line at http://www.transcendentalists.com/unitarian_christianity.htm, accessed March 31, 2006.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ Parker, Theodore, "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity" (sermon delivered at the ordination of Rev. Charles C. Shackford in the Hawes Place Church, Boston, Massachusetts, May 19, 1841); available on-line at <http://www.prism.net/user/fcarpenter/parker.html>, accessed March 31, 2006.
- ¹⁰ Razor, Paul, "The Post Modern Challenge to Liberal Theology," *The Unitarian Universalist Christian* (Turley, OK), Vol. 58 (2003): 5.
- ¹¹ He and I had a rather interesting discussion and he left with a slightly confused look on his face. I don't think he had ever encountered a UU theologian.
- ¹² Gurwitsch, Aron, *The Field of Consciousness* (Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1964), 104.
- ¹³ Tarbell, David, "Value In Experience: Thoughts on Radical Empiricism: Reflections on Frankenberg and Stone," *Journal of Liberal Religion* (Chicago), Vol. 5, No. 1 (Spring 2005); available on-line at http://www.meadville.edu/LL_JournalLR_v5n1_Tarbell.htm, accessed March 31, 2006.
- ¹⁴ Kuhn, Thomas S., *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), *passim*.
- ¹⁵ Toulmin, Stephen, *Human Understanding; The Collective Use and Evolution of Concepts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), *passim*.
- ¹⁶ I am using the term *reality* here to refer to the way the world appears in our experience.
- ¹⁷ This thought could be extended to issues of meaning of a text when considered apart from its author. The meaning of Plato's dialogues, in this sense, is in no way bounded by thought that Plato might have explicitly held.
- ¹⁸ And further, even when it is self-dialogue that is involved, my experience tells me that such reflection can easily take me into areas which are in no way deductively implied by my starting place.
- ¹⁹ Since a 'logical method' must stay within a defined system of thought.
- ²⁰ This form of 'post-modernism' accepts the modernist assumption that if a decision cannot be based on strict logic it must then be arbitrary. It does not recognize any alternative approaches to decision.
- ²¹ I suspect there are problems with that idea stemming from Godel and other issues of indecidability (Patrick Grimm's conclusion that there can be no set of all truth). I'm not sure if that side of the issue should be brought in here.
- ²² Margolis, Howard, *Patterns, Thinking, and Cognition; A Theory of Judgment* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), *passim*.
- ²³ Hanson, Norwood Russell, *Patterns of Discovery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), *passim*.