

Unitarian Universalist Denominational Theology, 1993-1997:
A survey, critique, and articulation for the new millennium

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INTRODUCTION

This paper surveys and critiques texts published by various clergy and laity within the period 1993-1997. There was an extraordinary amount of writing devoted to the subject of UU doctrine during this four year period, and so it provides a fruitful opportunity for a survey and critique. The paper also seeks to articulate Unitarian Universalist doctrine.

I seek answers to the following questions: does a denominational theology actually exist? Is there a contemporary Unitarian Universalist doctrine? Are there material theological beliefs all UUs share? Should such a goal be pursued? What are some current formulations of UU doctrine or denominational theology (I use the terms *UU doctrine* and *denominational theology* interchangeably)? What are some critiques, alternatives and defenses to the use of a formal UU doctrine?

The paper is roughly divided into four sections. The first section deals with a definition of denominational theology; the call for its articulation; and typical problems in its formulation. Those problems include: its fluid nature, personal taboos, and the anathema of creedal tests.

The second section surveys some denominational theologies, which I have grouped into “schools” for my convenience. I look at *Adjectivists*, *Hyphenators*, *Prophets*, *Linkers*, and the *free church tradition* schools.

The last school surveyed, the “free church tradition”¹ was getting a major push by two prominent clergy. Other UU clergy in various parts of the United States have also adopted it as their own articulation of what our denominational theology or doctrine of the church ought to be. This school (like the others) seeks to make its vision normative for all Unitarian Universalists.

This third section of the paper deals with problems inherent in the “free church tradition.” These I identify as: problems with the appeal to the past as authority; the concept of freedom as an ultimate religious goal, freedom as (paradoxically) too restrictive, and “a church called Unitarian Universalism” (institution-building).

I pay special attention to this school, because the “free church tradition” is a more formal

elaboration to the ubiquitous and various declarations of the sort that say UUs can believe anything they want, they have no material beliefs, or that our focus is on religious questions to the exclusion of answers. I also look at how various denominational theologies have contributed to the phenomena of children who grew up in our churches failing to become adult church members in significant numbers.

I conclude the paper by offering an interpretation of what I think *the* denominational theology is: evolutionary theology bounded by religious liberalism as classically expressed.

Do We Need a Denominational Theology?

For the purposes of this paper, I take “denominational theology” to mean a set of beliefs statements that many Unitarian Universalists hold about *what* constitutes Unitarian Universalism. UU doctrine is another term I use. In a religion that emphasizes “deeds not creeds,” one may well wonder whether a denominational theology isn’t an anathema.

But an essential question for us is: Who are we? What do we believe? This comes up repeatedly in our associational endeavors. Almost monthly, something crosses my desk as a parish minister which begs the question: who are we? What do we believe? What do we stand for? Parishioners want to know. Strangers want to know. News commentators want to know. Judges ruling in custody cases where one parent accuses the UU parent of belonging to a cult want to know– what is Unitarian Universalism? What do people who hold that religion believe in common?

Many UUs– lay & ordained alike-- have grown quite expert at ducking the question. When asked what Unitarian Universalists believe in common, we answer instead with a list of famous UUs or we deny we believe anything in common, or respond with what we personally believe, making careful note that other UUs believe differently. This question of what we believe in common– a denominational theology– is constant & vexing.

By way of example, I received a packet sent out to all UU congregations from the Commission on Social Witness, a committee charged by the General Assembly to set up a program for congregations to consider reflection and action on that year’s theme: “Building Religious Tolerance Through Interfaith Cooperation.” Under *For Reflection and Discussion* on page 3, one reads:

How should Unitarian Universalists identify themselves when they enter into interfaith discussions? Do we define ourselves as “liberal Christians?” Are we people who study religion without necessarily identifying ourselves as being “religious people?” Do we define ourselves by what we are not? Or do we exist as an association that includes many different faiths under one umbrella?²

This set of questions is being asked in order to figure out how we present ourselves to other (primarily mainline Protestant) interfaith groups. We find a very different set of questions when

we are asking *ourselves* who we are. As the Rev. David Bumbaugh has put it, we are

...much clearer about wanting to attract more people than we are about what we want to attract them to... [I]t is easier to embrace diversity than to define who we are and what we stand for.³

Another example of the call for denominational theology can be found in an essay by Walter Herz in the independent publication, the *Unitarian Universalist Voice*. Herz says the addition of earth-centered spirituality to “our already lengthy list of sources in our Principles and Purposes” has increased his “feelings of dissatisfaction with the religious fuzziness of Unitarian Universalism.”

In my vision I saw clearly that Unitarianism, in its century-and-a-half flight from its roots, becoming ever more inclusive along the way, had long ago stretched the concept of a religious denomination to the point of meaninglessness.

He ascribes the problem of a UU-ism that has a “virtually limitless range of theological positions” as making it “inordinately difficult” to “communicate readily to the uninitiated.” This in turn, “has severely limited the expansion and impact of liberal religion and, as a consequence, jeopardizes its future.” He reiterates: we have “an impossibly wide spectrum of beliefs.” Herz believes

There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that creation of a new affirmation and covenant is the *sine qua non* of UU-ism’s resurrection as a religious denomination.⁴

Herz’s proposal raises more questions than it answers. For example, while Herz may have this particular “epiphany,” how do we decide— as individuals, as congregations, as an association of congregations, the “what and whether” of denominational theology? This leads us into the general problems of denominational theology.

PROBLEMS WITH UU DOCTRINE

In this section, I look at standard problems for the articulation of doctrine within the UU faith. Our theology doesn't seem to stay fixed, we shrug off the task by saying "it's not easily defined," some people feel it is taboo, and finally, and attempt at articulating or identifying UU doctrine is dangerously close to becoming a creed, and is best avoided.

IT DOESN'T STAY FIXED

The General Assembly’s Commission on Appraisal published a report in 1998 on congregational polity: *Interdependence: renewing congregational polity*. Section eleven alludes to the difficulty of articulating UU doctrine due to its seemingly fluid nature.

The Commission notes that theological beliefs can be passionate and that differences in theological opinion can divide congregational communities and have done so in the past. This happens particularly when individuals express fear that they won't feel as free as perhaps they used to feel, to express their theological opinions or that "their faith will be compromised." meaning the church is drifting away from them theologically or that their personal theology is no longer dominant in their church or in our wider association.

This leads to some congregations attempting a "least common denominator" approach to UU theology,

so as not to offend anyone. But this does not seem to be a solution. As individuals, most Unitarian Universalists seem fairly reluctant, if not uncomfortable, disclosing or discussing their personal theology. While our collective acceptance of multiple theologies serves us well most of the time, our collective theological ambiguity sometimes acts as a point of division and conflict. If we are to reach a deeper understanding of the multiple theologies that we affirm, as Unitarian Universalists, theological dialogue is needed, keeping in mind that while debate may promote mutual growth, it will not necessarily reduce fear.⁵

The Commission asks if we are a non-Christian religion and identifies the problem in answering: "Neither what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist nor what it means to be Christian is easily defined."⁶

While it is true that these are difficult questions: who sets the boundary? They are not unanswerable. In most religious traditions, there is a hierarchy of authority that ultimately rests with the group that names itself. In other words, "what it means to be Christian" is determined by Christians; what it means to be Unitarian Universalist is determined by Unitarian Universalists. It is also important to remember that different communities in different times and places will position emphasis and content differently.

Many lay persons and clergy have noticed a historical shift in denominational theology that various people have identified as moving from an emphasis on "humanism" to an emphasis on "spirituality." The Commission writes on the receding dominance of humanism as the majoritarian articulation of denominational theology:

It is somewhat ironic that some humanists have begun to articulate their feeling of marginalization within UU-ism. Many who joined [a congregation] before the 1960s, says the Reverend Suzanne Meyer, "often wonder whether they are losing their congregations, whether the style of religion they discovered in UU-ism still exists."

It is difficult to say which theological perspectives are dominant in UU-ism at this point. What is clear, however, is that we are becoming a more theologically diverse religious movement.⁷

The Commission goes on to note that in the past 10 years, UU-ism has been in the middle of a theological shift which suggests “greater diversity” rather than a new “dominant trend.” They identify 3 factors in the latest theological shifting.

The first is: “pendulum swings in religious ideas “the world over.” Presumably, by this they mean religious and spiritual trends like the decline of commitment to mainline religious institutions with a concomitant hunger for authentic religious experience. It doesn’t take much searching to find these kinds of cycles in the history of the American religious experience (e.g., in emotionalism and rationalism). The Commission suggests that we are presently moving from “anti-authoritarianism” and fierce devotion to religious freedom to an emphasis on the spiritual quest and I would add: institution-building.

PERSONAL TABOO

The Commission identifies other factors which “serve as barriers to strengthening our common theological understandings:”

“Lack of clarity or a common definition of what theology is”

“lack of understanding or appreciation” of theology

“an unwillingness or inability to respect fully or learn more about theologies other than their own”

“an association of personal theology with credal religion, doctrine or dogma”

“an inability or reluctance to reopen old wounds associated with past religious experiences.”⁸

I would add: *a conflation of personal with denominational theology and then complaining about the dissonance.* I believe we will see this much more forcefully when we examine some current articulations of either what our denominational theology is or what it ought to be.

A Story That Could Be True

It is sometimes easier to see why these barriers have been erected by individuals whether consciously or unconsciously if we look at a typical conversion story of “yesteryear” for a Unitarian Universalist. A person from another religious tradition– usually one they have long since disavowed– discovers Unitarian Universalism. Sometimes tears come to their eyes when they declare that this religion (or faith or philosophy) is what they have been searching for their whole life. They did not know that such a “thing” like Unitarian Universalism could exist: that a religion could accept them for who they are, not condemn them for not being more perfect; that they could be an atheist, and still have the benefits of “church;” that they were not alone, others of their generation and culture were glad to welcome them into a community where they were needed.

How intoxicating! Such a person can revel in the *freedom* of religious belief and expression they

find in their local society. Sometimes this is a form of humanism (religious, secular, natural, etcetera). They go on a spiritual journey, perhaps take the adult religious education course, *Building Your Own Theology*, and then they are able to articulate their theology fairly well. So far, so good.

Then, somehow forgetting our third principle ("Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations"), somehow forgetting the openness and tolerance which welcomed them in the first place, they wonder if Unitarian Universalism can really handle all this freedom of belief.

WORRYING WHAT OTHERS WILL THINK

Maybe it will shock the middle class and people won't join us; maybe UU-ism is a private club, and is too good to be considered a "religion", it ought to be considered an *alternative* to religion. The disdain for things that are more concrete, emotional, and affective (especially ritual) quickly becomes apparent. When pressed, this attitude says: Unitarian Universalism is unique because of our (note the "our" now!) emphasis on the abstract, intellectual, and rational.

If there is an objection— say an argument is made for the concrete, emotional, affective, or institutional— the objector is quickly steered into an apodictic display of intellectual pyrotechnics, again, keeping the emphasis on the abstract, intellectual, and rational. The base of the problem is that we are told, in effect, that there is one method of pursuing religious meaning. This becomes a dogma. Although a person rejects the dogma of their youth, they seem to insist that their personal dogma become the group dogma. One solution to competing dogmas is to make it taboo to discuss them. This leads us into the twisted posture of a contortionist: our churches are sanctuaries for spirituality, but we're dissuaded from discussing our beliefs.

In my experience as a parish minister there is another reason people hesitate to identify or pursue a denominational theology: those who have a painful religious past may feel that their personal theology was already once rejected: why risk such an experience again? Traditional religious language and practice can also have this effect. Paradoxically, rather than work to heal old religious wounds, in perhaps the *one best place* to do that work— their local congregation— they make it taboo, not only for themselves, but attempt to make it taboo for everyone else.

FRANCHISED CREEDAL GROUP-THINK

The Rev. Brent Smith has written extensively on the idea that “freedom of belief is the essence of the free church.” The Reverends Smith and Earl K. Holt, III, plus others who espouse the “free church tradition” seem to hold that a denominational theology threatens individual freedom of belief. Here is the fear of violating our one real creed: that we have no creed. A denominational theology comes too close to that boundary, these writers claim. Of course, this is in itself, a denominational theology.

Conrad Wright, in his seminal book, *Congregational Polity: A Historical Survey of Unitarian and Universalist Practice*, notes that while our denominational theology (in terms of commonly accepted beliefs) have changed over recent history, our congregational polity has not. Thus, he does not see a historical rationale for the elimination of confessions, credos, or belief statements. Wright notes we have always had theological boundaries, and these did not become creeds:

But condemnation of the use of creeds for the definition of boundaries does not mean a rejection of boundaries themselves. When the liberals insisted that one should turn to the Bible for a revelation of God's plan of salvation, not to human systems of doctrine phrased in non-scriptural language, they were marking out a boundary line that excluded deists and freethinkers, such as Tom Paine.⁹

For example, the

Winchester Confession is best understood as a consensus statement, identifying a normative understanding of the Universalist position of 1803, not as a creedal test to be used for disciplinary purposes.¹⁰

Wright, Henry Whitney Bellows, and others (including myself) maintain that the wording in the Winchester Confession, the Principles and Purposes, and various of our social justice resolutions at General Assemblies are descriptive, not prescriptive. As Wright puts it: "these are boundary-defining statements, which may be somewhat fuzzier for that purpose than the historic creeds of Christendom, but which perform the same function."¹¹

The tension between a search for an articulation of what boundaries us and the anathema of creed as litmus test for membership has always been with us. While one solution to this problem is simply to avoid saying who we are, it remains uncomfortably insufficient and interferes with evangelism. There will always be a guess at what is commonly believed among us, and not articulating it doesn't make it go away. Professor Wright notes that in the 30 period after the Civil War, the Unitarians were searching for a consensus on what they believed in common:

Some Unitarians wanted to draw the line so as to include only those who considered Christianity to be a divinely ordained religion... The Radicals of the denomination protested that such a boundary would exclude them, and they often argued against any limitation whatsoever. Actually their objection was to the way the boundary would be drawn, not to the idea of boundaries. None of them would have included within the consensus Trinitarians, believers in double predestination, or those who accepted the infallibility of the pope.

If anyone should be found outside the boundary, it would be by his or her own choice, not by any official act of exclusion.¹²

Professor Wright identifies what I see as three criteria that help separate "a statement of what we

commonly believe” from a true creed. First, such statements have never achieve “the standing of a sacred test that may not be revised or replaced.” Second:

It is left up to the individual to decide whether he or she belongs within the covenant of a particular local religious community, and power is not assigned to ecclesiastical authority to decide whether the applicant is to be allowed in.

And finally,

The definition of the boundary is a result, not of hierarchical control of wayward churches, but of living together, and communicating to one another our deepest and most thoughtful insights as to human experience and the mystery that surrounds it.¹³

While the problems of denominational theology will always be with us, we are still called upon to define who we are. I believe it is possible and necessary to separate statements of belief from creeds.

DENOMINATIONAL THEOLOGIES: SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

In this section, I look at what I posit as various "schools" of thought regarding UU doctrine. In particular, I look at four strategies to the problem of UU doctrine. Each school offers its own take on what UU doctrine is, and how that school is normative for all.

DEFINING UU DOCTRINE

Despite the barriers, there are plenty of people willing to attempt to define what *the* Unitarian Universalist theology is. To begin to define denominational theology, it often seems like identifying our mission, purpose, or covenant is a good place to start. Here are five examples of mission-based Unitarian Universalist doctrine:

- 1) to build the realm of love and light here on this earth¹⁴
- 2) distinct from the world, united for worship and for the mutual edification of one another, in the Fellowship of the Lord Jesus.¹⁵
- 3) to institutionalize freedom¹⁶
- 4) our common ground is liberal Christianity¹⁷
- 5) a communal search for truth using critical reason¹⁸
- 6) the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.¹⁹

I am sure additional theologies of Unitarian universalism or a statement of what is commonly believed among us could be found. Certainly, our *Principles and Purposes* are an attempt at a denominational theology. One could also make the case for David O. Rankin’s *What do Unitarian Universalists Believe?* One could also add James Luther Adams’s *Five Smooth Stones*, and various other articulations. There is no apparent shortage of credos. Although it seems to be

commonly accepted that there are multiple theologies within Unitarian Universalism, whether and what a Unitarian Universalist theology is, whether there is a definitive theology and whether it is fixed in time, is a question of much intensity.

ADJECTIVISTS, HYPHENATORS, LINKERS, AND PROPHETS:
FOUR STRATEGIES IN DENOMINATIONAL THEOLOGY

There has been a good deal of writing by clergy and lay persons on identifying our current or permanent systematic theology for several reasons. One is that there is a perceived generational shift in the majoritarian theology, from “humanism” to “spirituality.” Another reason is that several years ago, a UU minister’s convocation attempted to define what was “transient” and what was “permanent” about liberal religion (meaning Unitarian Universalism). Finally, there has been increased awareness that a lack of a coherent denominational theology limits our ability to declare what religious beliefs Unitarian Universalists have in common: both to ourselves for purposes of mission, and to others for purposes of evangelism.

Various writings from 1993-1997, lay claim to what is or ought to be normative UU theology. Here I identify some of those that seem to align themselves in “schools,” or articulated theologies that have multiple adherents. Many UU ministers seem to have strong feelings on this matter, particularly as various challenges to their interpretations come along (I am no exception!).

First, I examine claims that there is no coherent Unitarian Universalist theology at all, instead, there is something else. For example, some people have claimed that the phrase “Unitarian Universalist” only makes sense as an adjective. These writers I label “UU Adjectivists.” The Adjectivists mainly come from two different theological orientations: Christian and Humanist. Each position often sees itself and the other as occupying two ends of a bipolar continuum within Unitarian Universalism.

It should also be unsurprising that this school seems to be made up entirely of those who “converted” to Unitarian Universalism from some other religious tradition. It is difficult, if not impossible, to find adult Unitarian Universalist church members who grew up in our churches and participated to some extent in their church life who believe there is *no such thing* as a Unitarian Universalist faith. It may be then, that the Adjectivist position is but one stage on a faith journey of a “convert.”

The UU Adjectivists: Christians

At a panel discussion sponsored by UUs for Freedom of Conscience at the 1993 General Assembly in Charlotte, NC, the Rev. Michael Boardman (then president of the UU Christian Fellowship), maintained that we are not a religion, but a religious institution; being just UU, rather than being a UU Buddhist, or UU Christian or (take your pick), “is to be incomplete.” Several of the other panelists gave their assent to the idea that “Unitarian Universalist,” when applied to theology, is an adjective and makes no sense as a noun.

Two years later, the Rev. Carl Scovel, also a self-identified UU Christian, continued this thinking in an essay in the December 1995 *Connections*. He writes that the larger denomination's decision to incorporate "earth-centered" spirituality does not jibe with his personal theology in that he does not "look to Earth itself or Nature as the source of our faith and values."²⁰

The addition of the "source" confirms Rev. Scovel's perception that "the UUA has become not a new religion but, openly and honestly, a federation of faiths— humanist, pagan, Christian, theist, feminist and Buddhist." Rev. Scovel goes on to say that he does not see a "common theological center." Instead, he sees "an openness, not a common identity."²¹

This is one approach to the question of a UU theology: there is no *substance*, but an *openness*. The Rev. Harvey Joyner has said almost exactly the same thing.²² On a different part of the theological map, some UU Humanists concur.

The UU Adjectivists: Humanists

There is another grouping of UUs who espouse the idea that Unitarian Universalist only makes sense as an adjective. For example, a 1980 pamphlet entitled *A Secular Humanist Declaration*²³ is advertised as being endorsed by 58 leaders of thought, which included at the time, two UU ministers, the Rev. Khoren Arisian, and the Rev. Paul Beattie, then president of the Fellowship of Religious Humanism (there is in fact, a sermon prize, given for the best sermon with the theme of "freedom of conscience" given every two years in honor of the Rev. Beattie). The first principle elucidated in the *Declaration* is the commitment to free inquiry, the second relates to separation of church and state, and the third to the ideal of freedom. Repeatedly promulgated is the idea that the most important liberal religious principle is "don't tread on me."

Humanist gatherings at the 1997 General Assembly served as frequent reminders that some people would only identify as a humanist Unitarian Universalist, not a Unitarian Universalist "in general." The kind of humanist they were, was a Unitarian Universalist humanist. The implication was and is, that if Unitarian Universalism ventured too far from their brand of humanism, they would shuck the onerous adjective.

Duncan Howlett, in his book, *The Fatal Flaw at the Heart of Religious Liberalism*²⁴, belongs to this school. He writes that religion must be rooted in process, not ideals, that there is no exception to this, and that we must have complete freedom of expression in this area. He mentions the logic and reasonableness of the humanist position (although he doesn't use that exact language), and he underscores religious liberalism, rather than Unitarian Universalism. This seems to underscore the general UU Adjectivist approach.

The UU Adjectivists: Others

There are other UU writers who take the Adjectivist approach (and whose personal theological

base is unclear to me due to my own ignorance of their position). Nevertheless, their published denominational theology insists on an absence of commonly held beliefs. For example, the Rev. John Alexie Crane, begins his essay, “The Passionate Enduring Center,” with these words: *Individual Unitarian Universalists may describe themselves as UU, Christian, Jewish, humanist, atheist, or theist. The movement as a whole, however, is not identified by any belief system.*

I do find it somewhat ironic that Rev. Crane ends his essay by pointing to a study which affirms that

being a UU is characterized by holding a constellation of values which differentiates such persons from other kinds of religious communities and, at the same time, develops an internal sense of community and a homogeneous community.²⁵

One might find it difficult to distinguish between a “constellation of values” and a belief system. The use of euphemism points to the taboo nature of articulating UU doctrine.

The Problem with the UU Adjectivist Approach

The Adjectivist approach tends to focus on the *way* we do liberal religion at the expense of what constitutes liberal religion; in fact, there is no *thing* that constitutes liberal religion, instead there is a process. Since there are no commonly held beliefs, there is nothing to talk about or explore in this area. All such attempts are seen as threats to individual belief, as unnecessary creedalism, and as obnoxious attempts to undermine one’s own personal theology.

The message seems to be that if there is an important element of our denominational statements we cannot *individually* support, we can choose not to see ourselves *and all other* Unitarian Universalists as comprising a denomination. This approach attempts to avoid a present or future challenge to our own beliefs that such beliefs are not majoritarian. A short glance at our history will show that this is unlikely to succeed.

The Reverend Scovel’s essay is an exemplary attempt. He writes that he cannot subscribe to the list of sources of we draw upon in our UU theology, particularly the “spiritual teachings” of “earth-centered traditions.” Apparently, he feels a tension between his professed faith and that expressed by other UUs.

His solution to this problem is to say there is no UU faith. If there is no UU faith, what binds us back (*religare*) to one another? An “openness.” Since Rev. Scovel does not find enough in common between his religious identity and the religious identity he reads in the *Principles & Purposes*, his solution is to say that there is no common identity, that we are not a religious denomination after all.

I believe that where this approach breaks down is in its insistence that this “federation of faiths,” this focus on process to the exclusion of material belief, is *itself* a material belief. This means that not only do the UU Adjectivists believe that their view is true for them, it means that they believe

it is true for me too. The solution to the problem of UU theology is to say there isn't any.

This view tells me that I am wrong if I believe that there *is* a Unitarian Universalist faith. It seems to be based on a “winner-take-all” kind of theological posturing: if I find fault with *one* of the sources of theology for Unitarian Universalism, I can say there is *no such thing* as Unitarian Universalism. That means, I suppose, that there is no distinctively UU curriculum, no UU ritual, no UU symbols.

The UU Hyphenators: Buddhists, Pagans, et al

Some Unitarian Universalists find the hyphenated approach to be more descriptive when talking with other Unitarian Universalists and when they are “serious” about their practice.²⁶ The Rev. James Ishmael Ford in his essay, *The Lotus in the West*.²⁷ writes that some Western Buddhists have joined UU congregations in order to find more opportunities for social engagement, as a cultural connection, and to find a compatible religious education program for their children (there is little place for children in a *zendo*).

In this sense, the UU freedom of belief (or its faith) may be seen as compatible within a larger Buddhist perspective. The Rev. Ford also states that he believes Buddhism has much to offer Unitarian Universalists. Clearly there are Buddhists who join UU churches, and then by definition, are Unitarian Universalists. Such a person may primarily identify himself as a Buddhist or an individual might say she is a UU but with a Buddhist spiritual practice. No matter really: none of the self-described UU Buddhists I read of insist on the hyphenated approach for *all of us*, nor do they insist that “Unitarian Universalist” only makes sense as an adjective.

This same caveat also seems to be true of many UU Contemporary Pagans. What comes across is: “I am a Unitarian Universalist and I find the best expression of my spiritual practice within Contemporary Paganism.” I would argue that this expression is a substantially different view than the “federation of faiths” position. The former claims a Unitarian Universalist identity and a particular practice within that identity, the latter denies this possibility.

I find it heartening that this school seems to be gaining ground over and against the Adjectivist school. For example, at the 1997 General Assembly in Phoenix, AZ, another panel convened to talk about theological diversity within Unitarian Universalism. There were representatives from various faith practices in a panel reminiscent of the 1993 panel discussion. They included the contemporary pagan, Margot Adler, the Rev. Nina Grey (Jewish), the Rev. Jone Johnson (Humanist), and representatives of UUs who were Buddhist and Christian practitioners.

At one point, they were asked whether or not being a hyphenated Unitarian Universalist increased fragmentation among Unitarian Universalists. They all replied that they did not identify as a UU-whatever. Instead, they identified as a Unitarian Universalist, and if asked further they would identify themselves as a UU Buddhist (or whatever their faith practice happened to be).²⁸

UU Linkers: The Commission on Appraisal

In Section One of its report, *Interdependence: renewing congregational polity*, the Commission on Appraisal presents some theological perspectives to its main concern: congregational polity. Proposition #5 in italics is “the essential function of the congregation is to link the person to the universal religious community.”²⁹

It almost sounds like the congregation's purpose is to mediate universal religion or to provide a sort of clearinghouse or way station to religion past, present, and future. Or maybe to be an introduction service. You might think if this definition of congregational purpose were widespread, you could find it everywhere, but I have found this difficult. Certainly, I believe mediation is an essential component of ministry and spiritual empowerment. However, by itself, it is insufficient as a denominational theology.

The UU Prophets Calling Us Back: Christians & Humanists

In addition to Adjectivists, Hyphenators, and Linkers, there are also UU Christians and Humanists (for example), who claim a Unitarian Universalist faith, and a theological identity that has already been revealed to all of us. Unlike the theologies expressed above, these writers tell us there *is* a Unitarian Universalist faith. Our theology is plain, if only we would see it. It is in a recapitulation of a past doctrine as applied to our current situation. From my vantage point, foremost among the theologians espousing this view with a Christian bent are the Reverends Earl K. Holt III and John C. Morgan.

The Rev. Holt writes in his cogent essay, *Whatever Happened to Liberal Christianity?* that despite the fringe status granted to UU Christians by the rest of the denomination, we UUs retain a Christian ethos: “our common ground is liberal Christianity.” The Rev. Holt is clear that this ethos is what grounds all the rest of the more particular theologies one might find in Unitarian Universalist thought.³⁰

Similarly, the Rev. John C. Morgan writes in his book, *The Devotional Heart*, that “we need to be clear about what constitutes Unitarian Universalist spirituality.” Unlike Rev. Holt, however, he finds it very specifically in transcendentalism and pietism. Rev. Morgan believes that pietism forms the “devotional heart” of Universalism, and offers those of us with a spiritual hunger what we are looking for in spiritual renewal. Rev. Morgan believes, among other things, that ministerial candidates become familiar with Pietistic Universalism, and that further structural, and attitudinal changes be implemented in our denominational behavior to promote our understanding of this faith.³¹

Michael Werner, a UU lay person and president of the American Humanist Association, would likely agree that we have a faith and that it is in the past, but it is not what the Reverends Holt and Morgan think it is. He writes of his strong convictions that we have lost our way from the heart of our faith: Humanism.

In his essay, *Unitarian Universalism and Religious Purpose*, he writes that “the professional ministerial perspective has limited Unitarian Universalism and that religion’s enduring traits are now ignored.” He believes we “have abandoned our religious calling” for a “postmodernism [which] provides the assumptive, unchallenged premises that permeate all our thinking.” He writes that our greatness— which we abandon at our peril— resides in the notion that “religion must become more like science by employing a communal search using critical reason.”³² To some degree all three writers seem to point to the lack of a clear focus as one of our major weaknesses. In my reading of their work, they place high value on freedom of belief and mostly unencumbered religious freedom, but advise us to heed the wisdom of the past and re-examine our religious heritage to apply a part of it with fresh insights to the present. In sum, there is no question that we *have* a faith and it is in the past.

THE FREE CHURCH TRADITION

Contrary to the view that there is no UU theology and contrary to the view that it is of fixed substance, is the view that UU theology ought to be about the embodiment of the “free church tradition.” Like the UU Prophets, the free-church-ers warn us that we are straying from the correct path. Occasionally, the tone seems apocalyptic. There are two kinds of Unitarian Universalists: those who work to uphold this tradition and those who subvert it.

The term itself seems to refer to a major principle of religious liberalism: the mutual, free consent for relations among persons. Persons, and congregations made up of those persons, freely enter into a covenantal relationship with one another for their mutual liberally, religious purposes. This idea is embodied in the second stone of James Luther Adams’ famous *Five Smooth Stones of Liberalism*.³³ This position is fairly close to but different from the “federation of faiths” argument proposed earlier by Rev. Carl Scovel.

The Reverend Earl K. Holt, III often uses the idea of the “free church tradition,” as he expounds it, to warn us of an over-reliance on extra-congregational (not inter-congregational) associations and authority. The Reverend Holt is joined in his warning by the Rev. Brent Smith, whose promulgation of the “free church tradition” is slightly different. First I will look at the Rev. Smith’s promulgation, then the Rev. Holt’s. Next, I identify where I think this doctrine falls short.

As promulgated by the Rev. Brent Smith

The Rev. Brent Smith has written extensively on the free church tradition and warns us we are in danger of losing it. Perhaps his clearest and longest exposition is in his 1997 paper, “The Free Church: Revolution and Experiment.” He points to Conrad Wright for the “two characteristics that mark the free church and set it off from its orthodox counterparts:” each church calls its own minister(s), and each congregation determines its own criteria for membership.

The Rev. Smith believes that the free church tradition comprises more than that and emphasizes *freedom of belief* as the essence of the free church: “There are no necessary doctrinal or creedal boundaries that are common to free churches”³⁴ (except, one might suppose, the “free church tradition” itself).

Smith posits two essential definitions of association and mission for “churches and fellowships that claim a lineage to the spirit and principles of the Reformation” (meaning Unitarian Universalist churches and associations). The purpose of our association is “to institutionalize religious freedom” and the mission of churches is “to maintain and strengthen the free spirit” as well as “to help each and every person become a fully functioning, free individual.” This, in a nutshell is his doctrine of the church.³⁵

Smith maintains that freedom is a relational concept and requires a community to produce. This seems to be why congregations are necessary: “in order for [freedom] to [be] made real it needs to be embodied in a community devoted to protecting it and strengthening it.” The concept of freedom then, becomes the material faith we ought to hold in common and promote.

He believes that a look at our past show that “over time these congregations could be seen to be gathered to institutionalize religious freedom and help each and every person become a fully functioning, free individual.”³⁶

Smith is careful to note that freedom is not complete. For example, while he says that “there are no theological constraints on belief” he also says that “the free pew doesn’t mean you can believe anything you want and be, for example, a member of All Souls.” While Smith espouses complete *theological* freedom of belief, he does not condone complete freedom of belief in *extra-theological* matters.³⁷

He also makes the surprising assertion that “theological convictions are not appropriate criteria for membership.” A congregation’s or one’s own theological beliefs ought to have no bearing on consideration of membership.

Smith’s version of the free church tradition also guides ministers in their duty: “It is the responsibility of ministers to keep focused on the refreshing destiny of the free spirit, and the relationships that preserve and strengthen it.” That “refreshing destiny” is, presumably, more freedom. This leads Smith to quote Emerson in order to say that we are “only experimenters... [We do not] pretend to settle any thing as true or false. We unsettle all things... [We] simply experiment, an endless seeker, with no Past at [our] back.”³⁸

As promulgated by the Rev. Earl K. Holt, III

While the Reverend Holt has argued persuasively that Unitarian Universalists ought to recall our Christian heritage as our denominational theology, he is also clear there are more important considerations. Holt identifies the two most important tenets of the “free church tradition” as

congregational polity and individual freedom of belief. He goes back and forth on which he thinks is most important, but it is clear that both are essential tenets of his promulgation of “the free church tradition.”³⁹

He has long been concerned that our congregations sacrifice their autonomy for expediency and that the “free church tradition” is endangered by

sectarianism, the emergence of a sect called Unitarian Universalism. [The trend is clear]: away from a self-understanding of our movement as an association of independent congregations and toward a denominational church with local subsidiaries, or ‘franchises.’⁴⁰

The Rev. Holt warns of:

two competing tendencies within our Association– the one affirming the primacy of congregational polity and what I would label the free church tradition. The other tendency (the one more visibly gaining ground) is moving steadily if unconsciously in the direction of making us less of a diversified movement and more of a unified church in the ordinary understanding of that word– a church called Unitarian Universalism.

...our wider movement is casually and for the most part perhaps unconsciously drifting in the direction of sectarianism.⁴¹

Holt moves from *belief* to *process* in his definition of liberalism:

Liberalism is not a doctrine, not a creed, not a list of principles and purposes. It is a spirit and process, a way of being. And its primary goal, its real purpose, is to protect freedom of individual conscience and the right of dissent.⁴²

The Rev. Holt is serious about his anti-sectarianism. He wants new church members to “come to the understanding” that they aren’t joining a sect called Unitarian Universalism, or “even becoming Unitarian Universalists.” He thinks they are allying themselves with something bigger and more important than those things: “the great and noble heritage of the free faith.” That alliance includes the “great and good of every generation who have stood against all idolatries and hindrances to the spirit” and “freedom-fighters and freedom-lovers of every age and every race and nationality and every religion.”⁴³

PROBLEMS WITH THE FREE CHURCH TRADITION

It is important for Unitarian Universalists to affirm freedom of theological belief and pursuit. On that item, I think there is little question. It is part of the liberal religious tradition, Unitarian Universalism, and liberalism in general. It is part of our distinctiveness. We need occasional warnings about unconscious entropy which works against our long-term interests. It is easy for

congregations to become parochial and dependent on extra-congregational bureaucracy, leading to further neglect of inter-church activities on both a small and large scale. These concerns are certainly valid and genuine. There is also nothing wrong with a personal theology of “the free church tradition.” What I find problematic is the attempt to make it normative for all Unitarian Universalists.

In this section, I argue that the “free church tradition,” primarily as promulgated by the Reverends Smith and Holt, has serious drawbacks as a denominational theology. This “school” tells us that revelation is fixed in a revisionist past, and also that we have no past. It tends to work against commitment and action and is too inward-looking. There are problems with making freedom the final religious destination, problems which may be seen as unnecessary limitations which are ultimately self-defeating, even to the stated purpose of institutionalizing religious freedom.

The “free church tradition,” has many of the disadvantages of the other schools (adjectivists, hyphenators, prophets, and linkers) and few of their advantages. Like the *adjectivists*, it disparages or denies Unitarian Universalism as a religion, and it works to ignore common material beliefs. Like the *prophets* school, it calls us back to halcyon days of yore to recover our true distinctiveness— which we are sliding away from perilously. Like the *linker* approach, it ignores particularity of belief and the essential narrative of our history.

Its primary advantages seem to be an avoidance of difficult theological conversation, a tool for converts to emphasize their break from past religious beliefs without having to commit themselves to something new, and as a useful tool in decrying our tendency toward centralization of bureaucratic ecclesiastical structures.

Problems with the free church tradition: The past

The identification of the beginning of the “free church tradition” with the US Revolutionary war and with the idea of the Puritans promoting freedom is suspect. For example, on the Puritans: “over time these congregations could be seen to be gathered to institutionalize religious freedom and help each and every person become a fully functioning, free individual.”⁴⁴ Similarly, the assertion that American history is the “history of the attempt to institutionalize freedom in political terms” might be seen as a fairly narrow.⁴⁵

The Rev. Barbara Merritt, who also gave a paper at the Conference of Free Churches in March 1997, provides (as does Conrad Wright in *Walking Together*) a handy corrective:

most of us are guilty of ignoring the historical reality that has shaped and blessed us... We modern American Unitarian Universalists are too easily seduced into thinking that we are a whole new kind of being, with no need to revisit the Hebrew scriptures or the gospels; no need for any clear grasp of our Protestant roots.⁴⁶

She goes on to remind us that the Puritans were not about promoting religious freedom, individual or collective, nor were they concerned with a post-Freudian concept like the “fully functioning, free individual.” They were an “exclusive community, only for those who had responded to the divine call, living an exemplary life.”⁴⁷ They were strong on group discipline, not individuality. They attempted “to coerce their fellow citizens into submitting to the one true church.”

The Puritans promoted an anti-self-esteem and a “federal covenant” theology dependent on good works. Freedom, as they understood it, had nothing to do with freedom of belief or action; instead it was the choice to carefully and totally follow the sacred obligations.⁴⁸ They were against any idea of certainty in salvation and promoted anxiety about the afterlife in order to motivate people to good works. There was no concept of the “improvability” of persons.

The Puritans were conservatives who only insisted on freedom from ecclesiastical hierarchy because they believed themselves “inheritors of a divine destiny” and that the majority back in England were wrong. Their idea about freedom was freedom *from* interference, not the freedom *to* become spiritually empowered; the freedom to walk together, not the freedom to discover for one’s self.

These ideas are in direct opposition to Universalist ideas that we are *all* already saved, and free to perform good works, which conform to a major idea of liberalism: that people are “improvable.” The link between the “free church tradition” and the early Puritans seems untenable (a more likely link with the past is with the “radicals” at the National Conference of Unitarian Churches in 1865).

If we put aside the appeal to authority by pointing to the past, part of the “free church tradition” insists on no past to fetter us. The Rev. Smith quotes Emerson to the effect that we are only experimenters with no past, no interest in certitude or veracity, as part of the conditions for the “free pew.”⁴⁹ This seems to undermine the appeal to the past for the authority of the “free church tradition” and it ignores reality.

It is erroneous to say we are *only* experimenters— we want to make institutions, too. It is also wrong to say we don’t settle anything— we have a tradition and we do make social pronouncements, there is Evil. We are not endless seekers, we seek in order to *find* (however temporarily). And we certainly have a past at our back. While it is good to “pretend” to be Emerson in our investigations on occasion, always operating out of that mode nullifies any progress, and reduces us to religious dilettantes.

Finally, if the tradition to which this school appeals is firmly fixed in the past, we may wonder where our engagement with it makes a difference. How are contemporary Unitarian Universalists necessary to co-create the tradition? This is a problem with any denominational theology which tells us that revelation is essentially sealed in the past.

Problems with the free church tradition: the concept of freedom

Holt says liberalism is a process, not a list of principles and purposes. That liberalism's primary goal is to protect freedom of conscience. I agree that "a" primary goal of liberalism is to not only protect freedom of conscience but to promote it: that is, to promote the idea that we are each called upon to articulate our conscience and to examine it in the light of our principles. Apparently, where we part company is in the idea that Liberalism is not only or ultimately spirit, process and way of being, it is also finally a *belief*, a set of beliefs as well as a process and an attitude.

There are many credos and confessions which can be useful as pointers to what constitutes liberal religion in general and Unitarian Universalism in particular. In any event, it is clear to me that freedom of religious belief is where we *start* from, not where we ought to congratulate ourselves on ending up.

Not only is freedom not an ultimate goal, but making a dogma out of freedom, in and of itself, limits freedom. Insisting on the use of freedom as lens denies the freedom to use something else as a lens, while not acknowledging the limits of freedom. For example, the Rev. Smith wants ministers to concentrate on promoting freedom, but in doing so he limits their freedom to preach as they see fit (which may not be about promoting freedom, but about commitment, e.g.)

The "free church tradition" and the Adjectivist schools emphasize "don't tread on me." They reinforce the notion of our theology as functional (how we do it: freedom *of* and freedom *from* particular belief) over and against UU theology as material (what exactly we *do* believe in common) or of UU theology as teleological (what our aim is, what we are in business for). It is dishonest and counter-productive to leave out the material and teleological, because we hold those views individually and collectively whether we publicly articulate them or not.

This again brings us to the insufficiency of freedom as the ultimate theological goal. Freedom is a tool. The "free church tradition" ignores the fact that a moral foundation is needed to use freedom for "good." Freedom requires a good we can all hold in common. Freedom requires a published method about how we can come to know this good, otherwise freedom is useless.

To what ends will the tool of freedom be used? We cannot be neutral about the content of individual choice, because such choices have public consequences. Michael J Sandel writes in *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy*,

The liberal vision of freedom lacks the civic resources to sustain self-government... The public philosophy by which we live cannot secure the liberty it promises, because it cannot inspire the sense of community and civic engagement that liberty requires.⁵⁰

Sandel seeks to revive "civic republicanism" which holds that "freedom is not a matter of individual choice but of self-government." Civic republicanism in a church setting is another

phrase for “stewardship.” It requires commitment to an institution. This in turn means a willing sacrifice of potential freedom for actual commitment. The “free church tradition” can work against that kind of stewardship. Ultimately, the “free church tradition” cannot secure the freedom it promises because it cannot inspire the sense of community required to build the kind of institutions necessary to sustain the tradition.

We Unitarian Universalists *do* have something to say about what the good is and how people can come to know it. I believe we do have a moral and theological basis for a “civic republicanism” that the “free church tradition,” the Adjectivist, and the Linker positions are inadequate to describe. The “good” is liberal religious principles as “pointed to” by James Luther Adams, David O Rankin, and our *Principles and Purposes*. People come to know the good through the pointers to it, but more importantly through the six (and other) sources of Unitarian Universalism.

The “free church tradition” as espoused by the Rev. Smith also has a problem with defining the boundary of freedom. For example, there are no constraints on theological belief, but there are constraints on non-theological belief; this seems arbitrary. Other than saying you can’t yell “Fire!” in church, the limits of “non-theological belief” are not defined. This seems like a major omission.

The Rev. Smith also says that theological convictions are inappropriate for membership. While I would agree that creedal tests are an anathema, it is an ill-advised directive. Theological convictions, after all, are what separate us from the Southern Baptists and Congregationalists who share our polity and anti-creedalism. Theological convictions are why people come to us.

Problems with the free church tradition: inward-looking and restrictive

Emphasizing the “freedom from” is easy for ministers in large churches with corresponding size in the church budget, in the size of the staff, and in church governance itself. Larger churches tend to be more staff-driven, and they “need” the Association of churches less than smaller ones do. They have the resources to develop their own religious education curricula, and are often seen by their own members, as “flagship” churches, due to their size, wealth and reach, relative to other Unitarian Universalist congregations.

Some staff-driven churches have moved more to a “CEO-model” of hierarchy and accountability. This usually places the senior parish minister in a supervisory capacity over staff and program.⁵¹ It is easier to be parochial in a large church, and the emphasis on freedom can be advantageous (and necessary) for those charged with responsibility of the entire church program. I do not mean to say, however, that the “CEO-model” requires the “free church tradition” or vice-versa, just that it can make governance issues easier on ministers. It is perhaps an interesting omission that while maintaining the inter-church notion of congregational polity, neither the Reverend Holt nor Smith mention that congregational polity is also a system of governance within a congregation.

Beyond congregational size considerations, the free church tradition explicitly concentrates on “inner” congregational life. The Rev. Holt believes a church’s primary covenant is to and among its own members. This is true, but by itself, it is insufficient. In order to avoid solipsism, we must include a covenant to something outside our immediate selves.

This tendency toward looking inward to the congregation as the exclusive focus and locus of all activity and interest ignores legitimate extra-congregational structures like theological schools, the entire arena of social action, institution-building in general, Unitarian Universalism as a religion, and the necessity of each generation defining its own theology. In actuality, congregations want all those things and cannot provide for them by themselves; hence, they form associations to do the work for them. It is this sense of denominationalism that has built these institutions. Without them, there would undoubtedly be fewer pulpits for the promulgators of the “free church tradition.”

As Henry Whitney Bellows put it, “Freedom, whether political or religious has no power to produce anything; it merely leaves the faculties free to act”⁵² The fact or goal of religious freedom does nothing for those who already count themselves religiously free. We are free to remain inert, inactive, un-motivated, and religiously wounded. We are free to ignore the necessity of working to heal the world; we are free to ignore the effects of our actions and privilege. We are free to keep separate our “talk” from our “walk.”

An over-emphasis on freedom in the pew encourages us to maintain a no-commitment or low-commitment to our church, to healing the world, to taking a stand, to arriving at a conclusion (however temporary), to identifying Truth, to becoming spiritually fed and content (again, however temporary). An over-reliance on freedom can attenuate our commitment to spiritual empowerment— other people’s or our own, because any action necessarily limits our freedom. Any choice we make about anything, automatically closes off other opportunities. Any move from potentiality to actuality automatically closes off some other, unchosen, potential. The total concentration and end goal of freedom serves to encourage inaction.

All the great religious traditions emphasize a commitment to personal and collective spiritual empowerment. The free church tradition seems to ignore this imperative. While the Rev. Smith points to a goal of a “fully functioning, free individual” it remains unclear to me how pure freedom, unfettered by any theological propositions beyond those stated, can help make an individual “fully functioning.” What does “fully functioning mean?” Does it mean that all the parts work and there are no restrictions on belief and action? If so, then this is not enough. The road to spiritual empowerment requires— in some measure— that an individual be able *and* willing, have a plan, and be engaged in that plan. The “free church tradition” doesn’t seem to require or ask for any positive action beyond the creation, maintenance, and promotion of more freedom.

Problems with the free church tradition: A Church called Unitarian Universalism.

The Rev. Holt, as a fifth generation Unitarian and with over 25 years of parish ministry experience, has long warned us of the entropic trend toward bureaucratic self-rationalization that tends to make ecclesiastical structures look more toward consolidation of power and their own institutional needs rather than the affairs of those persons or congregations they were created to serve. He warns of a forming unified church with a headquarters and franchises. In that warning, he has been a consistent and articulate critic.

The Reverend Holt wants people to join the “free church tradition,” not Unitarian Universalism. But most people who join our congregations do not have the same connection to history (or know as much of it) as ministers do, or as the Rev. Holt does. Newcomers do think (and rightfully so), that they are joining something much more concrete. They are indeed joining a sect called Unitarian Universalism. Concepts like religious liberalism have pragmatic currency only insofar as they are embodied in the concrete here and now.

Both the Reverends Holt and Smith argue against the concept (and reality) of a sect or denomination called Unitarian Universalism. Instead, they promote the “free church tradition” in its place. They also claim a link to the Puritans, but a link to the Rev. Octavius Brooks Frothingham is closer and more easily made. Conrad Wright tells us about Frothingham’s concept of freedom:

Frothingham’s concern was to defend the complete intellectual and spiritual freedom of the individual, which institutions invariably compromise. To the extent that he had a concept of religious fellowship, it was a purely spiritual relationship of individual seekers after religious truth, with no necessary embodiment in a covenanted community.

Frothingham represents the individualistic rejection of ecclesiasticism in general and Unitarian denominationalism in particular characteristic of the so-called Radicals.⁵³

Since institution-building was put aside in the name of freedom, Frothingham ended up concentrating on the sermon-- which brought in the crowds-- instead of institution-building, which would assure the continuation of a place for liberal religion in their communities.

But nowhere in the life of the society was there either cultivation of the devotional spirit through sacrament or ritual, or organization to promote cooperation for human betterment. Frothingham’s preaching was what mattered. He was an effective public speaker with a personal following, enlarged by many curious casual listeners. In 1879, when ill health made it necessary for him to give up his preaching, the church disbanded because nothing remained.⁵⁴

An over-reliance on freedom then, can work to the detriment of institution-building. It may be that the best way to “institutionalize freedom” is not to insist on it to the exclusion of support

structures. Although the Rev. Smith says that we need churches to institute religious freedom (that's churches in the "free church tradition" exist), one might wonder if the Americans United for Separation of Church and State and the American Civil Liberties Union are more ably suited to the task: neither has the denominational baggage the "free church tradition" school is wont to discard

HOW VARIOUS DENOMINATIONAL THEOLOGIES HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO OUR ANTHROPOLOGICAL FAILURE

Adjectivist, Linker, and "free church tradition" schools form part of the legacy of our failure to successfully transmit our culture such that substantial numbers of our children choose to become adult members of our churches. In the words of the Rev. Suzelle Lynch, we seem unable to "keep the ones we raise."⁵⁵

As a lifelong UU, one of the 15 percent of UU church members who "grew up" in the denomination, I find much to agree with in the Reverend Elizabeth Parrish's essay⁵⁶ on how we "lose" our children. She offers two primary reasons for our loss: we don't offer children something definite to believe, and we segregate our children from corporate worship services.

The UU hymnal published in 1993, *Singing the Living Tradition*, points to the idea that children have a different set of religious needs than adults do. The reading in our hymnal constituting a children's version of our *Principles and Purposes*, entitled *Principles and Purposes for All of Us*, is formed by the words: *we believe...*

The idea that not offering our children something definite to believe, an idea inherent in the Adjectivist, Linker, and "free church tradition," denies those children the option of Unitarian Universalism as a religion. Its effect is to deny them their religious faith, tradition, and history. It abdicates our responsibility to pass on our principles and our faith. We sacrifice their religious education for our personal taboos against naming what we commonly believe.

To hand our children a faith which fixes revelation in the past, as the Prophets want, is to deny our children *that which we have claimed for ourselves*: the opportunity to co-create their faith in community as history unfolds. We must remember that the present will be *their* history (which is why Kahlil Gibran's reading about children is so important), and not ours alone.

The children of 1960s Humanist parents may have turned out to be 1980s neo-Pagans. Children who grow up learning that revelation is fixed in the past have less incentive to develop their own theology, whether those children grew up in the 1950s escaping liberal Christianity or whether they grew up in the 1970s wincing under a "flat-earth" Humanism.

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST THEOLOGY AS EVOLUTIONARY

One of the clearer articulations upon the idea that Unitarian Universalist theology ought to be cast as evolutionary is in an essay from the Reverend Susan Pangerl. She writes that our future

success "...requires our willingness to publicly reclaim our constructive task of the continuous revisioning of theology."⁵⁷ This constructive task I call "evolutionary theology."

Evolutionary theology promotes the idea that revelation is continuous. In order to identify it and claim it, periodic public articulation is required. How our faith is revealed to us, how we reveal our faith to others, which parts of it get emphasized at what times in our life, the way we articulate this faith— this changes over the course of our lives and through the generations. But the essential ideas of our liberal religious faith remain. It is what we inherit. To the extent we grapple with it and make it fully our own, is the extent to which we make our own theological contributions to the people who come after we are gone.

In the final section of this paper I will look at three aspects of Evolutionary Theology. The first (and perhaps trickiest) is *what* constitutes core Unitarian Universalist doctrine; the second aspect is consideration of sources for our evolutionary theology, and the final aspect is how the process of evolutionary theology "works:" a distinctly Unitarian Universalist approach to spiritual growth.

CORE UU DOCTRINE

This is generally agreed to be a tricky area for UUs to venture into, for all the reasons previously discussed. This is because of our non-creedal nature, written into the UUA bylaws.⁵⁸ Being non-creedal means we agree not to make defining issues of things known only through faith. It means we agree our knowledge of ultimate things is limited; therefore, we replace knowledge of ultimate things with hope (and work) for ultimate conditions.⁵⁹ Our belief system is goal-oriented, we are about "deeds not creeds."

Sometimes this makes our church doctrine appear as sub-atomic particle phenomena or chasing after quarks: the closer you get to pinning down UU doctrine, the more elusive it becomes. Unitarian Universalists tend to believe that human beings have an innate capacity for goodness, an inherent worth & dignity, which can be affirmed. They tend to believe that humans are not born in sin, estranged from divinity, and incapable of participation in their own destiny. They tend to believe that salvation is at hand— that heaven and hell are here on earth in our daily lives.

Denominational articulations are frequent (as is to be expected in an evolutionary faith), numerous, and much discussed.⁶⁰ I believe there are currently three primary denominational articulations of UU doctrine or denominational theology. Other denominational articulations focus on a smaller set of the faith.

These three articulations provide an over-arching approach to UU doctrine. The *Principles & Purposes* is the first. One of my favorites is David Rankin's "What Do Unitarian Universalists Believe?" And the third is James Luther Adams' *Five Smooth Stones*, an exemplary model of evolutionary theology.

James Luther Adams' points to this concept well in his *Five Smooth Stones*, where he lists the five most important foundations of religious liberalism. They are:

1) Revelation is continuous; (2) We must aim for mutual, free consent for relations among persons; (3) we have a moral obligation to work toward establishing a just and loving community; (4) and the faith of the liberal must express itself in social forms as this molds history. (5) Finally, an attitude of ultimate optimism is justified.

Note what Adams maintains is the *first* smooth stone: revelation is continuous. This goes along with the idea that our personal and collective theologies form a sort of "loose-leaf bible." The idea that normative UU theology promulgates common beliefs, that Unitarian Universalism is incomplete as a religion, that it exists only as a gateway to some other community, or that its purpose is to embody a tradition from long ago, is to deny that revelation is continuous.

SOURCES OF EVOLUTIONARY THEOLOGY

Below, I take a cursory view of various sources for evolutionary theology including pamphlets, religious education curricula, the hymnal, minister's convocations and email exchanges.

The idea of evolutionary theology would suggest that one could discover it in hindsight; that is: the process of evolutionary theology could be gleaned from the important documents in our denominational history. And so it is. Entire books could be written on the confessions and covenants that preceded the *Principles & Purposes*.

The very idea that the denominational articulation of UU doctrine can be seen to have changed over time is a supporting argument in favor of an evolutionary theological approach. This is over and against a bounded set of revelations encased in scripture happening in a singularity in time beyond our reach or measure, that is more popular with the orthodox.

The UU *Principles and Purposes* is unusual (compared to articulations of orthodox religion) in the sense that it points to a list of sources from which we draw. Unlike the orthodox who look to a single book, persona, tradition, scripture or revelation, UU doctrine has a list of sources; further, that list can change over time, as the fairly recent addition of the sixth source (spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions) indicates.

One can also note changes in denominational pamphlets. There is a softer focus on humanism, a shift in target audience focus from those who suffered a painful religious wound to those who come "unchurched."

The implicit emphasis in UU religious education has also shifted. For example, in curricula written by Sophia Fahs, we see a "one step removed" view of Christianity, for example, for UUs, Christianity is not literally true, one ought to think instead in terms of metaphor, and we see an emphasis on world religions. More recently, we can see changes in sexuality education, the shift

in focus from racial issues 30 years ago to lesbian and gay issues today. One might compare the "Haunting Church" curriculum to "On the Path." One focuses on the wounds of the past; the other, on the spiritual territory ahead.

One overlooked resource for denominational theology may be our hymnal. Much of the debate upon publication of the 1993 hymnal revolved as much around theology as it did hymnody.

The Hymnal contains past and present denominational articulations. It has become another source for the periodic articulation of the UU faith. After all, the hymnal is the single book all UUs might own or have access to for an extended period of time. It—unlike any other UU book—is expected to represent us for a number of years, and it is not a "take" on a particular subject, it is an avenue for UUs to exclaim their doctrine.

The hymnal contains our doctrinal goals, and it calls us to action. We can see both of these ideas in fragments of the hymns themselves.⁶¹ First, let us look at the idea that the UU hymnal promulgates doctrinal goals in the language of poetry. Here are some examples:

one world, goal of all the ages
we live not for ourselves alone
fruits of peace and love and justice
the city of the light
earth shall be fair and all her people one
all speech flow to music, all hearts beat as one
I must answer Yes to life

with those of all races, all times and names and places
God's vision growing
bread and roses
where race and class unite
where love embraces all
and no longer will we live in fear
a song of peace for lands afar and mine

Second is the idea that our hymnal calls us to action:

we are a gentle angry people, singing for our lives
the people rise in every land to break the captive's bond
for it we must labor, till our faith is sight
grant us courage for the facing of this hour
this little light of mine, I' m gonna let it shine
once to every soul and nation, comes the moment to decide

Beyond the hymnal are written essays, formal and informal, on paper and in cyberspace which attempt to elucidate some aspect of what the writer declares as normative UU doctrine. These have been published as UU Minister Association Chapter covenants and in the Covenant of the 1995 UUMA Convocation, affirmed by approximately 530 UU ministers in March 1995, at Hot Springs, Arkansas. The introduction reads:

In the midst of mystery
And the enduring presence of religious community,
The creative power of transforming love
Engages us in the beauty and tragedy of life
To awaken compassion, call us to justice,
And invite us to live in harmony with the earth.⁶²

A sizable number of UU ministers came up with a statement about the "core of our faith." Undoubtedly, this will happen again in the future, and while the core of our faith may not be a moving target, the articulation of it certainly is.

A much more frequent process of evolutionary theology occurs in cyberspace where some 400 UU ministers— almost half the credentialed ministers in the UUA— are subscribed to the "uuma-chat" line. The Reverend Daniel points out that this email uuma-chat is akin to a midrash:

Reverend So-and-So said thus about the passage in question, Reverend Such-and-Such countered with this— but Reverend By-your-Leave said that— . These exchanges are denominational theology in process.⁶³

Evolutionary theology means doctrinal emphasis changes in response to changes in our culture and in the people who make up the faith. Changes in technology, philosophy, art, history, urban planning, politics— all affect how people think about meaning and ultimate things, which in turns fuels our approach to religion. This approach to religion points to a UU doctrine of spiritual discipline.

A UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST PATH TO SPIRITUAL EMPOWERMENT⁶⁴

Evolutionary theology suggests a four-fold spiritual path that is distinctly Unitarian Universalist. I would suggest the following schema: identifying ones spiritual history, articulating ones theology, taking some spiritual risks, and becoming an elder.

Newcomers to UU congregations know that the process of becoming a Unitarian Universalist isn't as simple as signing a membership book, but we don't talk about the process of *conversion* much. The religious sense of the word *conversion*, means to turn around, to find new ways to live ones life based on beliefs. I see the conversion to a depth-oriented Unitarian Universalism as comprising four simple (not easy!) steps.

Identify your history. We are each born into a world we did not create, speaking a language not of our choosing. We are not responsible for the world we were born into, the circumstances of our birth, or the religious heritage we were invested with, whether fundamentalist or nonexistent. And yet, here we are. To plan a journey, one must know the map and places previously visited.

Articulate your theology. This can be done in an adult religious education course like, *Building Your Own Theology* or *Conversations With the Bible*. The process is never finished, but many people never really get started. The questions one must ask oneself are: Why are you here? Where is the joy in your life? What do you willingly give your life to? What do you believe about life & death, the divine, spirituality & religious experience, ethical living?

Take some spiritual risks. A person can try prayer without worrying about deity. If your inclination is to avoid the poor and destitute, try working in a soup kitchen. If you're afraid of death, volunteer in a hospital. If you're not creative, write poetry, paint, or sing. Use your spiritual fear like a Geiger

counter– not to stay away, but to run headlong *toward*. Such risk-taking will help you grow spiritually and it will modify your theology, which in turn will suggest new spiritual risk-taking.

Become an elder. When we first get involved with church, we need to pay attention to our spiritual needs. Many of us come to a UU congregation for the first time, fresh from or in the midst of crisis. It is right and natural and important to find how the church can serve our spiritual needs. But the path to a depth-oriented Unitarian Universalism cannot simply stop there. Once we identify our history, articulate our theology, and take some spiritual risks, we must take our “ministry” or service out into the larger world, through and with our “church.”

The evolutionary theology path means we can move from being *just* a spiritual seeker to more than that: to a creator and nurturer of the beloved community, to work to provide a church home for others not yet met, but just like us– thus coming back full circle.

Endnotes

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1. I put “free church tradition” in quotes because in its recent articulation, it seems neither free, nor a church, nor a tradition.
 2. Commission on Social Witness. Action/ Reflection Guide for 1997-8: Building Tolerance Through Interfaith Cooperation. A letter sent to all UU congregations, 10/97.
 3. Nancy Jay Crumbine. “Is There a Center and Can it Hold?” in O’Neal, Wesley, Ford, eds. *The Transient and Permanent in Liberal Religion: Reflections from the UUMA Convocation on Ministry*. Boston: Skinner House, 1995. She is quoting David Bumbaugh, *The World*, March/April 1995, page 26.
 4. Walter P. Herz. “The Eternal Yes.” *Unitarian Universalist Voice*. P.O. Box 23144, Santa Fe, NM 87502. Spring 1997 pages 1, 4-6.
 5. Commission on Appraisal. *Interdependence: renewing congregational polity*. Boston: UUA, 1997. Page 145.
 6. *Interdependence*, page 146.
 7. *Interdependence*, page 147.
 8. *Interdependence*, page 147-148.
 9. Conrad Wright. *Congregational Polity: A Historical Survey of Unitarian and Universalist Practice*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1997. Page 62.
 10. Wright, page 94.
 11. Wright, page 205.
 12. Wright, pages 87-88.
 13. Wright, page 206.
 14. David Hicks MacPherson, “Unitarian Universalism: is it a viable religion?” in the *UU Voice*, Spring 1997, pages 8-10.

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15. Wright. Here Professor Wright is referring to a 17th century congregational confession.
 16. Brent Smith, "The Free Church: Revolution and Experiment." Address given to the Conference of Free Churches, Tulsa, OK, 3/6/97.
 17. Earl K. Holt, III, "Whatever Happened to Liberal Christianity" in O'Neal.
 18. Michael Werner in "Unitarian Universalism and Religious Purpose" in O'Neal.
 19. David Bumbaugh, *The World*, March/April 1995, p.26.
 20. It should be noted that the resolution was to add an addition to a list of many sources, not to proclaim it as *the* source.
 21. Carl Scovel. "Covenants or Principles." *Connections*. December 1995, page 6 (formerly a public information journal of the UUA).
 22. Harvey Joyner. "From the Interim Minister: Our Multi-Faith Communion." Minister's column in the First Universalist Society of Salem, MA newsletter. 9/24/97.
 23. Paul Kurtz. *A Secular Humanist Declaration*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1980.
 24. Duncan Howlett. *The Fatal Flaw in Religious Liberalism*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1994.
 25. John Alexie Crane. "The Passionate Enduring Center" in O'Neal.
 26. Wayne Arnason. "Hyphenation and Spiritual Practice." *First Days Record*. 420 Willa Rd. Newark, DE 19711. September 1997.
 27. James Ishmael Ford. "The Lotus in the West" in O'Neal.
 28. From a conversation with the Rev. Bonnie Vegiard about a theme workshop she attended at GA.
 29. *Interdependence*. Page 148.
 30. Earl K. Holt III. "Whatever Happened to Liberal Christianity?" in O'Neal.
 31. John C. Morgan. *The Devotional Heart: Pietism and the Renewal of American Unitarian Universalism*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1995.
 32. Michael Werner. "Unitarian Universalism and Religious Purpose" in O'Neal.
 33. James Luther Adams. *On Being Human Religiously: Selected Essays in Religion and Society*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1976, pages 12-21.
 34. Smith, page 2.
 35. Smith, page 4.
 36. Smith, page 7.
 37. Smith, page 6. He mentions that you believe in yelling "Fire" in the church sanctuary when there isn't one. This is a typical limitation on free "speech."

38. Smith, page 7.

39. Earl K. Holt, III. "The Wise Weakness of the Congregational Way." Address given to the Conference of Free Churches in Tulsa, Oklahoma. March 6-9, 1997. On page 3, he writes "It is to this structure [congregational polity] even more than to our devotion of the principle of individual freedom of belief that is intended when I refer to ours as a free church." Here he emphasizes polity. Later he emphasizes freedom of belief (page 8): "Our historical movement has always put individual liberty of conscience at the head of its defining principles."

40. Holt. *Wise Weakness*, page 5.

41. Holt, *Wise Weakness*, pages 8, 9.

42. Holt. *Wise Weakness*, page 7.

43. Holt. *Wise Weakness*, page 10.

44. Smith, page 5.

45. Holt. *Wise Weakness*, page 7.

46. Barbara Merritt. *Congregationalism, and the Rise of Colonial Democracy*. Address given to the Conference of Free Churches in Tulsa, Oklahoma. March 6-9, 1997. Page 6.

47. Merritt, page 7.

48. Merritt, page 10.

49. Smith, page 7.

50. Michael J Sandel. *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997. From the review by Christopher Beem, "The making of citizens," *Christian Century*, 12-4-96, pages 1206-1208.

51. This model, elucidated particularly well in a book by John Carver (*Boards That Make A Difference: A New Design for Leadership in Nonprofit and Public Organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), is in use to varying degrees at our largest churches in Portland, OR Dallas, TX, St. Paul, MN, and other places.

52. John A Buehrens and F Forrester Church. *Our Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989. Page 49.

53. Conrad Wright. *Congregational Polity: A Historical Survey of Unitarian and Universalist Practice*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1997. Pages 67-68.

54. Wright, pages 69-70.

55. Suzelle Lynch. "Keeping the Ones We Raise: Evangelism to Our Children and Young Adults" in Scott W. Alexander, ed. *Salted With Fire: Unitarian Universalist Strategies for Sharing Faith and Growing Congregations*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1994.

56. Elizabeth Parrish . Title unavailable, in O'Neal.

57. Susan Pangerl. "Into the Woods: In Search of Our Stories" in O'Neal.

58. See section C-2.4 "Nothing herein shall be deemed to infringe upon the individual freedom of belief which is inherent in the

Universalist and Unitarian heritages..."

59. Dennis J. Daniel. *A Response to Daniel Ó Connell's Paper, "Promises to Keep."* Presented at the Ramapo Study Group of the Metropolitan New York Minister's Association meeting, All Soul's Day, 1997.

60. An old saw goes: "wherever you find 2 or 3 Unitarian Universalists, there you shall find 4 or 5 opinions among them."

61. Daniel. *A Response to Daniel Ó Connell's Paper, "Promises to Keep."* The examples come from Rev. Daniel's paper.

62. This version was sent to me by Rev. Kenn Hurto, Vice-President of the UUMA.

63. Daniel.

64. DANIEL Ó CONNELL. "HOW TO CONVERT TO UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM IN 4 SIMPLE STEPS" IN *FIRST DAYS RECORD*, FEBRUARY 1998.