

The Theology of A. Powell Davies

by Jennifer Crow

I. Introduction

Unitarian Universalist theology is an individual search for truth and meaning that recognizes the value of all individuals, the diversity of relevant spiritual beliefs, and emphasizes the practical results of personal beliefs. A. Powell Davies' work provides one example of a Unitarian theology that fits well in the context of Unitarian Universalism. Davies believed in the universal brotherhood of man, equality, freedom, a developing world community, reason and personal experience, democracy, individual and collective responsibility, science and psychology, faith in action, and the zealous pursuit of truth. Davies refused to put stock in superstition, miracles, or creeds. In a statement presented to the AUA Board in 1944, Davies clearly articulated his conception of Unitarian theology.¹ He declared that:

Unitarian churches are founded on Individual Freedom of Belief, Discipleship to Advancing Truth, the Democratic Process in Human Relations, Universal Brotherhood, undivided by nation, race or creed, and Allegiance to the Cause of a United World Community.²

II. Social context and biography

Arthur Powell Davies was born on June 5, 1902 to a Welsh family in Birkenhead, England.³ His father, Arthur Davies, was a tin smelter who left Wales with his wife, Martha Powell⁴, in order to support their family of four children.⁵ Davies attended and graduated from local schools in Liverpool and worked briefly as a clerk for a large shipping company. While employed at the shipping company, Davies participated in a

¹ This statement soon replaced the earlier Five Points (The Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of Man, the Leadership of Jesus, Salvation by Character, the Progress of Mankind Onward and Upward Forever) and came to be widely used in the denomination.

² In October of 1944, Davies presented a "Declaration of Faith" and an "Affirmation of Purpose" to the AUA Board. Parts of these statements were excerpted in: Staples, Lawrence C. Washington Unitarianism: A Rich Heritage. Metcalf Printing; Northampton, MA, 1970. P. 105.

³ Marshall, George N. A. Powell Davies and His Times. Skinner House Books; Boston, 1990. p.1

⁴ "A. Powell Davies." taken from American National Biography Online. P.1. INTERNET. Available from: <http://www.anb.org>

⁵ Marshall, p.31

strike and consequently lost his job. During the strike, however, Davies met the strike leader and was invited to become his private secretary. While living in London, Davies joined a debating society where he was encouraged to pursue a career in politics by George Bernard Shaw.⁶

Davies followed his calling to the ministry, however, and entered the University of London Methodist training school, Richmond College. He graduated with a B.D. in 1925⁷ and was designated the Theological Prizeman during his junior year. Davies was assigned to a mission church at Beacontree, on the outskirts of London where he served from September of 1925 to April of 1928. During his ministry, church membership increased significantly and the congregation successfully conducted a large building campaign.⁸ While at Beacontree, Davies married Muriel Hannah, daughter of the minister of his home church, in December 1927.⁹

Davies had long been interested in emigrating to the United States, and said, "If I believed in the transmigration of souls, I would have to believe that my particular soul was American in its previous embodiment, for the history and development of America always enthralled me."¹⁰ The Davies arrived in America on May 17, 1928 and Powell began his first American assignment at 2 parishes in Goodwins Mills and Clark's Mills, Maine.¹¹ During their first winter, Powell began work on his Doctor of Philosophy at Boston University School of Theology while continuing to serve his parishes in Maine.¹²

In April 1929, Davies discontinued work on his degree and was assigned to the Pine Street Church in Portland, Maine. He quickly became a spokesman for liberal issues, often preaching on controversial social and international issues.¹³ In Portland, the Davies family had their first child, Gwen,¹⁴ and Powell met and became friends with The Reverend Vincent Silliman, a Unitarian minister and president of the local Minster's

⁶ Marshall, p.7

⁷ American National Biography Online, p.1

⁸ Marshall, p.8

⁹ Church, Forrest, ed. *without apology. Collected Meditations on Liberal Religion by A. Powell Davies.* Skinner House Books; Boston, 1998. P.2.

¹⁰ Douglas, 17.

¹¹ Marshall, 9.

¹² Marshall, 11.

¹³ American National Biography Online, 1.

¹⁴ Douglas, 18.

Association.¹⁵ Davies had always been a fairly independent preacher, dropping the Apostle's Creed from his services before arriving at the Pine Street Church, and his transformation from Methodism to Unitarianism was a gradual process.

Silliman introduced Davies to the Unitarian faith and spoke with him at length about the on-going controversies in the denomination. When Davies decided to apply for fellowship with the American Unitarian Association (AUA), the Methodist superintendent pleaded with Davies to stay within the denomination and preach as he wished.¹⁶ Davies, however, was attracted to the non-creedalism of Unitarianism, and believed that, "Unitarianism, like the United States, was founded on freedom and was therefore a truly 'American' faith."¹⁷ Davies received preliminary fellowship with the AUA on February 14, 1932.¹⁸

Davies was called to the pulpit of the Summit Community Church in New Jersey in January 1933. At Summit, Muriel and Powell became American citizens and had their second child, Bronwen.¹⁹ Congregational membership quickly increased from less than ninety to several hundred members.²⁰ Davies also began writing, and his first book, *American Destiny*, was published in 1942. Davies became a respected and powerful voice in the AUA, and his extensive involvement in denominational affairs moved him into a leadership role.²¹

Davies was called to All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C. in the fall of 1944. During his 13 years at All Souls, the congregation experienced unprecedented growth. An overflow system was instituted to handle the large crowds on Sunday mornings, and the service was simultaneously heard in a hall adjoining the main sanctuary. Under Davies' leadership, seven new Unitarian congregations were formed in the Washington area, and several of these congregations initially listened to Davies' sermons by direct wire on Sunday mornings.²²

¹⁵ Marshall, 21.

¹⁶ Douglas, 19.

¹⁷ Douglas, 19.

¹⁸ Marshall, 25.

¹⁹ Douglas, 19.

²⁰ Douglas, 20.

²¹ American National Biography Online, 1.

²² Douglas, 21.

Davies also continued writing prolifically. His work was published in the *New Republic*, the *Nation*, the *Progressive*, *UnionNow*, the *New York Times Magazine & Book Review*, and the *Herald-Tribune Book Section*.²³ While serving All Souls, Davies authored several books including *The Faith of an Unrepentant Liberal* (1946), *America's Real Religion* (1949), *Man's Vast Future: A Definition of Democracy* (1951), *The Temptation to Be Good* (1952), *The Urge to Persecute* (1953), *The Language of the Heart: A Book of Prayers* (1956), *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (1956), *The Ten Commandments* (1956), and *The First Christian: A Study of St. Paul and Christian Origins* (1957).

Davies was also extremely active in local and national affairs. He served as the President of Food for Freedom and was on the Board of Directors of the Unitarian Service Committee, Meadville Theological School at the University of Chicago, and Federal Union, Inc. He was an active council member of the Planned Parenthood Federation, the National Committee for Mental Hygiene, Americans for Democratic Action, the Population Reference Bureau, and Protestants and Other Americans for the Separation of Church and State.²⁴ As a result of his work, Davies was awarded an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Meadville Theological School in 1947, received the Annual Award of the N.A.A.C.P. in 1949,²⁵ and received a Doctorate of Humane Letters degree from Howard University in 1955.²⁶ While in Washington, Davies chaired the Emergency Conference on Civilian Control of Atomic Energy, led several campaigns for overseas relief, and founded Americans for Democratic Action, a consortium of Anti-Communist liberal forces in America.

Davies worked with great intensity and slept little. He would regularly work until 3 or 4 in the morning, preferring the quiet, and then sleep until 9:30 or 10 a.m. When working on a book, Davies would work steadily throughout the day and early into the morning, stopping only for dinner. When preparing a sermon, Davies would announce the topic on Tuesday and consider it for the rest of the week. Saturday afternoons were

²³ American National Biography Online, 1-2.

²⁴ "A. Powell Davies Biography 1902-1957." INTERNET. Available from: <http://www.dmuuc.org/Davies/bio.html> P.4.

²⁵ Staples, 112.

²⁶ "A. Powell Davies Biography 1902-1957." INTERNET. Available from: <http://www.dmuuc.org/Davies/bio.html> P.5.

spent engaging in a hobby, such as gardening, boatbuilding, photography, or carpentry, and at 8 o'clock in the evening he would enter his study to type his sermon, allowing no interruptions and often working past midnight. Sermons were typed in a kind of shorthand, and Davies had a rule that it must be possible to distill what he intended to say in a sermon down to a single sentence.²⁷

The Davies traveled to Europe regularly during the summers, and Powell was particularly fond of South Germany. Powell also maintained a close relationship with his two children. He was known to them as a strict disciplinarian and a great storyteller, creating characters and spinning imaginative yarns which he then told employing various dialects.²⁸

When Davies died while working at his desk in the parsonage of All Souls on September 26, 1957 at the age of 55, the newspapers reported that he had had a heart attack. Davies death, however, was caused by phlebitis with the immediate cause being "a pulmonary infarct secondary to a thrombophlebitis of the leg veins."²⁹ Davies had struggled with phlebitis for many years and had undergone surgery in 1953. Unfortunately, the pain returned and during his last year, Davies worked in a posture chair with his feet up and a typewriter on his lap, frequently calling on his wife or assistant to get him a particular book. Throughout his illness, Davies maintained a full preaching and speaking schedule.³⁰

When Davies arrived in Washington to serve at All Souls Unitarian Church in the fall of 1944, the nation was at war. Soon after the end of World War II in 1945, the United States moved into a cold war with the Soviet Union. Anti-communism permeated American culture and

in a series of moves abroad and at home, it [the Truman administration] established a climate of fear- a hysteria about Communism- which would steeply escalate the military budget and stimulate the economy with war-related orders. This combination of policies would permit more aggressive actions abroad, more repressive actions at home.³¹

²⁷ Douglas, 22-3.

²⁸ Douglas, 26-7.

²⁹ Douglas, 28.

³⁰ Douglas, 28.

³¹ Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States 1492-Present*. Harper Perennial: New York, 1995. 417.

After 1948, the House Un-American Activities Commission (HUAC) broadened its focus from the Communist influence in Hollywood to include attacks on prominent scientists,³² government employees, and clergy.

A pivotal experience occurred for Davies on a trip to Poland in February of 1948. Davies was traveling on behalf of the Unitarian Service Committee for the dedication of the Kosciusko Hospital. Upon his arrival in Prague, Czechoslovakia, Davies was scheduled to meet with Jan Masaryk for an interview. The meeting was postponed several times and eventually it became clear to Davies that Masaryk was under house arrest and a Communist faction in the Czech government was coming to power. The Communist revolution in Czechoslovakia had begun. Davies' hotel was seized and his bags were searched. Davies narrowly escaped the country with Masaryk's intervention and assistance. Masaryk died of questionable causes two weeks after Davies left the country.³³

III. Theological/Philosophical context

In many sermons, Davies identified William Ellery Channing and Thomas Jefferson as theological influences.³⁴ Davies clearly agreed with several of Channing's major points regarding the superiority of Unitarianism. In particular, Davies words resonated with the following points; that Unitarianism exists in harmony with nature, that Unitarianism is not limited to the written word, but opens the mind to ever-enlarging views of God, and that Unitarianism is a rational religion.³⁵ Davies also referenced the work of Sigmund Freud as an aid to understanding the human mind.³⁶

Davies defined himself against the work of Karl Barth and other European theologians. He attacked these theologians, claiming that they created a feeling of moral helplessness among the people of Europe that ultimately resulted in an environment

³² Schulz, 110.

³³ Schulz, 108.

³⁴ Davies, A. Powell. "The Unitarian Faith." Sermon. P.1-5.

³⁵ Channing, William E. *The Works of William E. Channing, D.D.* American Unitarian Association; Boston, 1886. Pp. 392-399.

³⁶ Freud is referenced in several sermons and repeatedly in *American Destiny*.

which fostered the rise of Hitler.³⁷ In this case, as in many others, Davies echoed the sentiments of Clarence Skinner.

For both Davies and Skinner, the idea of God was inseparable from political life. Ideals of God and ideals of economic and political life were constantly interacting, moving together equally and in the same direction.³⁸ Furthermore, like Skinner, Davies believed in the universal brotherhood of man³⁹ and taught that "those who have faith in the world are the ones upon whom rests the tremendous responsibility of redeeming the world."⁴⁰

Davies' ideas arose out of a long tradition of theological and philosophical thinking. Without quoting him directly, Davies clearly disagreed with Thomas Reid's conception of the conscience as a seed planted in the heart by God.⁴¹ Davies would have agreed with Joseph's Priestley's assertion regarding the mutually beneficial co-existence of religion and science.⁴² In one sermon, Davies rebuked Protestant ministers in words reminiscent of John Locke by asking, "What do they mean? They never define their terms."⁴³ In addition, Davies' statements frequently resonated with James Luther Adams' idea of a pragmatic theory of meaning that observed the relationship between thought and action.⁴⁴ Specifically, Davies once said, "I am not interested in what you think of the sermon, of the preacher, of the Church, or anything else. I am interested only in what you are going to do."⁴⁵

³⁷ Davies, A. Powell. "The Rediscovery of Sin." Sermon. P. 3.

³⁸ Skinner, Clarence R. *The Social Implications of Universalism*. Universalist Publishing House; Boston, 1915. Pp.17-21.

³⁹ Skinner, 35. Davies, "Declaration of Faith." Report to the AUA cited previously.

⁴⁰ Quote from Skinner, 50. Davies reference from his sermon, "The Rediscovery of Sin." P.5.

⁴¹ Reid, Thomas. "Essays on the Active Powers." *Inquiry and Essays*. Edited by Ronald E. Beanblossom and Keith Lehrer. Indianapolis, IN; Hackett Publishing Co., 1983. P.358. Davies reference from his sermon, "What is Conscience?" P.6.

⁴² Priestley, Joseph. *Priestley's Writings on Philosophy, Science and Politics*. Ed. John Passmore. New York; Collier Books, 1965. Davies sermon, "Can Science and Religion Get Together?"

⁴³ Davies, A. Powell. "Religion Can Make Sense." Sermon. P.1. John Locke describes the importance of defining terms, especially moral words, throughout his book, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

⁴⁴ Adams, James Luther. "The Use of Symbols." *On Being Human Religiously: Selected Essays in Religion and Society*. Edited by Max L. Stackhouse. Beacon Press; Boston, 1976. P.122.

⁴⁵ Davies, A. Powell. "What Can Anyone Do?" Sermon. P.5.

IV. Major Categories of Writer's Work

Human nature

Davies believed that self-knowledge was essential to emotional maturity and growth in human experience. A free mind was a mind free to choose,⁴⁶ and men must make the choice to gain insight. Davies argued that, "We must know ourselves as we are. We must recognize ourselves in our true character. Then we can do something about ourselves."⁴⁷

The conscience was a frequent topic in Davies' sermons. The conscience was not superstition⁴⁸ or some separate thing implanted in the brain or heart by God, but the "creative spirit of life itself moving within the thoughts we think and struggling for victory in the things we do."⁴⁹ In emotionally healthy individuals, the conscience was understood as a guide to spiritual health,⁵⁰ but in emotionally immature people, the conscience had the potential to work deviously and cause harm.⁵¹

Davies felt that the conscience was complex and varied in different people and different times.⁵² If, however, a person's development was wholesome, then "his conscience will be such that his reason reinforces it."⁵³ Conscience was understood as the "growing awareness of right and wrong, of good and evil...part of the essence of life itself...Conscience is the sight of the soul."⁵⁴

According to Davies, the soul and the mind were separate and could develop at different rates. It was possible, therefore, that one could simultaneously possess an undergrown soul and a developed mind.⁵⁵ For Davies, the soul was an "inner mystery of heart and conscience," and "the spirituality, the wide, deep sympathy, the compassion, the inner hardihood which makes it possible to deal strongly with one's own life and gently with all other life."⁵⁶

⁴⁶ Davies, A. Powell. "A Study in Treason." Sermon. P.5.

⁴⁷ Davies, A. Powell. "The Forgiveness That Comes Hardest." Sermon. P.4.

⁴⁸ Davies, A. Powell. "What is Conscience?" Sermon. P.5.

⁴⁹ Davies, A. Powell. "What is Conscience?" Sermon. P.6.

⁵⁰ Davies, A. Powell. "The Forgiveness That Comes Hardest." Sermon. P.3.

⁵¹ Davies, A. Powell. "The Forgiveness That Comes Hardest." Sermon. P.2.

⁵² Davies, A. Powell. "What is Conscience?" Sermon. P.3.

⁵³ Davies, A. Powell. "The Forgiveness That Comes Hardest." Sermon. P.2.

⁵⁴ Davies, A. Powell. "What is Conscience?" Sermon. P.7.

⁵⁵ Davies, A. Powell. "A Study in Treason." Sermon. P.4.

⁵⁶ Davies, A. Powell. "A Study in Treason." Sermon. P.3.

In Davies' understanding of the relationship between God and man, man bore considerable responsibility. Davies clearly articulated three rules for individuals to follow if they wished to live serenely. One should "face the realities; be energetic about the possibilities- and only the possibilities; accept the inevitabilities, freely frankly, and courageously," and give oneself "to what is more than they are – to the uttermost beyond them and the power of life within them – to the spirit of the highest and to God."⁵⁷

God

Davies believed in a God that was imageless, "God, the creative; God, the redemptive; God of brotherhood and love."⁵⁸ He was not so sure "about the will and ways of God,"⁵⁹ but he did believe that God was located "in the struggle."⁶⁰ For Davies, "God is what the soul affirms when life is accepted...when the soul says, I accept the life that is given me, the joy of it and the pain of it; I accept it and affirm it, and I will do what is given me to do; that is belief in God."⁶¹ In prayer, Davies invoked a God "whose ways are not our ways, and whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts."⁶²

Davies found God in living, in experience and perception.⁶³ He believed that while the existence of God outside of man might be possible, it was an unanswerable question. "But God within man," was "undeniable, except by those who do less living than debating."⁶⁴ Belief in supernatural intervention was "wrong in essence, immoral, irreligious,"⁶⁵ and Davies only asked God to save humans because he believed that "we are worth saving, and because I believe such a prayer is answered not by miracles but by the powers that God has given us to save ourselves."⁶⁶

Sin, Evil, & Salvation

Davies explicitly addressed the topic of sin and evil. He accused people of burying their heads in the sand by refusing to acknowledge the sin and evil present in the world. He stated that, "To the best of my observation and belief, sin is highly

⁵⁷ Davies, A. Powell. "Can Anxiety Be Mastered?" Sermon. P.5.

⁵⁸ Davies, A. Powell. "A Study in Treason." Sermon. P6.

⁵⁹ Davies, A. Powell. "The Rediscovery of Sin." Sermon. P. 5.

⁶⁰ Davies, A. Powell. "Where Now is Thy God?" Sermon. P.5.

⁶¹ Davies, A. Powell. "Where Now is Thy God?" Sermon. P.5.

⁶² Davies, A. Powell. "Is Socialism More Ethical Than Capitalism?" Sermon. P.6.

⁶³ Davies, A. Powell. "From the Future Comes a Cry." Sermon. P.4.

⁶⁴ Davies, A. Powell. "From the Future Comes a Cry." Sermon. P.4.

⁶⁵ Davies, A. Powell. "Religion Can Make Sense." Sermon. P.2.

⁶⁶ Davies, A. Powell. "The Rediscovery of Sin." Sermon. P. 5.

contemporary and we are all up to our necks in it."⁶⁷ For Davies, evil was a fact of human life and sin was evil that was entirely real and for which the evil-doer was responsible.⁶⁸ Davies frequently spoke of action, refusing to believe that there was nothing people could do about injustice or weaknesses in themselves. Humans were responsible for their own fate and their own salvation. Humans could do more than just call on God for a miracle, they must, in fact, use the power that they had to change their own future. Davies preached that, "Our hope is not in a miracle from the skies, but in the health that is in us! ...When we repent, the thing is to do it thoroughly and get it over with. Then go ahead and make amends. Go ahead and put some wrong things right, not weep over them."⁶⁹

Davies identified the worst sin of all as "not using the brains God has given us,"⁷⁰ and evil was to be fought valiantly and constantly. For Davies, faith meant action, "the life of man must be cleansed through effort and endeavor."⁷¹ If the world was to be saved, then it would "be by those who bring to God their sweat and toil, not by those who have nothing to bring but their tears."⁷² In Davies' understanding, "Why in the name of anything, anywhere, that makes the slightest vestige of sense, should God save a pitiful mass of broken-down whiners? If that's what we are, then the sooner the better we're incinerated and the universe made more sanitary"⁷³

Religion

No province in human life was excluded from religion for Davies.⁷⁴ Religion was as large as life and should go into all parts of life, claiming truth and righteousness everywhere.⁷⁵ Religion was not something separate and apart from ordinary life, it was life itself. "Life of every kind viewed from the standpoint of meaning and purpose; life

⁶⁷ Davies, A. Powell. "The Rediscovery of Sin." Sermon. P. 1-2.

⁶⁸ Davies, A. Powell. "The Rediscovery of Sin." Sermon. P. 2.

⁶⁹ Davies, A. Powell. "The Rediscovery of Sin." Sermon. P. 4.

⁷⁰ Davies, A. Powell. "The Rediscovery of Sin." Sermon. P. 4.

⁷¹ Davies, A. Powell. "Unitarianism – What is it?" Sermon. P.6.

⁷² Davies, A. Powell. "The Rediscovery of Sin." Sermon. P. 5.

⁷³ Davies, A. Powell. "The Rediscovery of Sin." Sermon. P. 5.

⁷⁴ Davies, A. Powell. "Can Science and Religion Get Together?" Sermon. P.3.

⁷⁵ A. Powell Davies quoted in, "A. Powell Davies Biography 1902-1957." INTERNET. Available from: <http://www.dmuuc.org/Davies/bio.html>

lived in the fuller awareness of its human quality and spiritual significance.⁷⁶ Religion, was also moral purpose and useful righteousness.⁷⁷ Davies believed that,

Unless the religion we can find can really meet our need; unless it is free from false beliefs, from escapism, from trust in the miraculous and supernatural; unless it is a religion that fosters the utmost moral effort of which we are capable; unless it is an honest, clear-sighted, open-eyed religion, then we should be a good deal better off without it.⁷⁸

It was also extremely important for Davies that religion make sense. While he believed that "Religion begins when a man says he does not know,"⁷⁹ he also believed that "not only can religion make sense. It must."⁸⁰ Religion was not wedded to nonsense. For Davies,

It is true that religion has to do at last with final questions to which no honest mind can give an easy answer; with hidden things and with mysteries. But it does not start there. It starts with life and the way we live it. And it makes sense. It starts...when a man faces a question to which he does not know the answer, and says to himself and to whoever asks him, "I don't know." In such a statement there is more religion than in all the creeds the churchmen ever wrote.⁸¹

Davies believed that creeds were divisive and had no place in religion. Scientific inquiry had determined that most creeds were false, and Davies thought there was no evidence at all that Jesus of Nazareth was God's only son or that he physically rose from the dead to ascend into a visible heaven.⁸² Davies believed in a liberal religion that "maintains the open mind to future discovery. It is not restricted by a creed...it follows advancing truth, and sifts out all wisdom, both new and old, trying always to know what experience vindicates."⁸³

Davies was careful to articulate that while the Unitarian religion centered around individual freedom of belief, this did not mean individual freedom to believe just

⁷⁶ A. Powell Davies quoted in, "A. Powell Davies, A Brief Biography." INTERNET. Available from: <http://www.dmuuc.org/APDavies.html>

⁷⁷ Davies, A. Powell. "The Unitarian Faith." Sermon. P.4.

⁷⁸ Davies, A. Powell. "Can Science and Religion Get Together?" Sermon. P.3.

⁷⁹ Davies, A. Powell. "Religion Can Make Sense." Sermon. P.3.

⁸⁰ Davies, A. Powell. "Religion Can Make Sense." Sermon. P.5.

⁸¹ Davies, A. Powell. "Religion Can Make Sense." Sermon. P.3.

⁸² Davies, A. Powell. "Can Science and Religion Get Together?" Sermon. P.3.

⁸³ Davies, A. Powell. "Can Science and Religion Get Together?" Sermon. P.5.

anything. Rather, the Unitarian religion supported individual liberty to believe the truth,⁸⁴ and for Davies, "No one can be truly religious who is not zealous for truth."⁸⁵

Truth

In Davies' understanding, truth was essential to religion and it was something that one must work to discern. "For religion...truth is supreme,"⁸⁶ and "truth will only shine in the sky for those who light her lanterns on the ground."⁸⁷ Davies saw truth as "What is really so," and believed that

if anyone will approach truth in this way, learning to live with it, he will presently find that he is not only living with it but living from it and by it, and suddenly he is aware, as though the sun had blazed at midnight, that truth is an ultimate radiance lighting the mind to God.⁸⁸

For Davies, Unitarians were not disciples of a person or an institution, "but of truth itself."⁸⁹

V. Oversights, areas of conflict, areas in need of further development

The primary area needing further development in Davies theology is his position regarding communism. Howard Zinn postulates that in the cold war hysteria of the late 1940s and early 1950s, the anti-Communist mood became strong enough that "liberals could support repressive moves at home which in ordinary times would be seen as violating the liberal tradition of tolerance."⁹⁰ This is, in fact, what happened with A. Powell Davies and his position regarding communism. Davies frequently identified communism and fascism as evil,⁹¹ and decreed socialism morally and ethically inferior to capitalism⁹² in his sermons.

While Davies despised Joseph McCarthy and frequently attacked the House Un-American Activities Commission in public statements, he was also always careful to denounce the methodology of the investigations, not their legitimacy.⁹³ In a chapter

⁸⁴ Davies, A. Powell. "Unitarianism – What is it?" Sermon. P.4.

⁸⁵ Davies, A. Powell. "Truth Needs Friends." Sermon. P.4.

⁸⁶ Davies, A. Powell. "Can Science and Religion Get Together?" Sermon. P.6.

⁸⁷ Davies, A. Powell. "Religion Can Make Sense." Sermon. P.4.

⁸⁸ Davies, A. Powell. "Religion Can Make Sense." Sermon. P.4.

⁸⁹ Davies, A. Powell. "Unitarianism – What is it?" Sermon. P.5.

⁹⁰ Zinn, 419.

⁹¹ Davies, A. Powell. "A Study in Treason." Sermon. P5.

⁹² Davies, A. Powell. "Is Socialism More Ethical Than Capitalism?" Sermon. Pp.1-6.

⁹³ Schulz, William. "The Minister and McCarthyism: A. Powell Davies and Post-War Hysteria," in *Alone*

entitled, "Must Freedom Protect Its Enemies?" Davies concluded that, "The notion...that a free society is bound by its principles to give the shelter of its civil rights to a conspiracy against the society itself, even if the conspiracy is succeeding, is insupportable."⁹⁴ At one point, Davies went so far as to taunt members of the House Un-American Activities Commission, requesting that they release the names of communist-identified clergy so that the church could root them out on its own.⁹⁵

A clear conflict can also be seen in the following comparison. In one sermon Davies stated that Communism was not merely a political movement, but a rival religion suitable only for stunted souls.⁹⁶ Meanwhile, in another sermon, Davies argued that, "When... churchmen draw closer to socialism and say it is the necessary outcome of religious idealism, they are mistaken. It is the necessary outcome not of religion but of irreligion; ...the necessary outcome of the evils of the human heart."⁹⁷ These two statements leave the reader wondering if political movements and ideals, such as communism and socialism, were in fact rival religions or simply examples of irreligion for Davies.

I agree with William Schulz regarding a central flaw in Davies' theology. Schulz stated that "On a theological level, the identification of religion with a particular political system is always problematic and runs the risk of sacrificing the universality of religious truth to the vagaries of the political moment."⁹⁸ Furthermore, I find it contradictory that Davies clung so tenaciously to the "American" ideal of freedom of belief while simultaneously advocating discrimination against those who expressed political opinions contrary to democracy and capitalism. I tentatively speculate that Davies' personal experience of the violent rise of communism during his trip to Czechoslovakia and his patriotic dedication to the ways of his new country significantly influenced his thinking in this area.

In his work regarding sin, evil, and salvation, Davies did not clearly articulate where the source of evil was located. At times, it appeared that Davies was moving in the

Together: Studies in the History of Liberal Religion. Edited by Peter Ivan Kaufman and Spencer Lavan. Beacon Press; Boston, 1978. p.112.

⁹⁴ Davies, A. Powell. *The Urge To Persecute*. Beacon Press; Boston, 1953. P.123.

⁹⁵ Schulz, 114.

⁹⁶ Davies, A. Powell. "A Study in Treason." Sermon. P.6.

⁹⁷ Davies, A. Powell. "Is Socialism More Ethical Than Capitalism?" Sermon. P.5.

direction of locating evil in humanity or as a part of God, but this area was not fully developed. Davies also failed to communicate a rigorous definition of truth. While he identified truth as essential to religion, Davies did not say whether truth was different for different people, or how exactly one was to find the truth.

Two other inconsistencies are also worthy of note. While denouncing communism and urging that communists be rooted out, Davies argued for the right of free speech for another un-popular minority group. In 1948, Davies defended a Federal Communications Commission decision stating that atheists had a right to public airtime.⁹⁹ In addition, despite Davies' frequent mention of the unrestricted brotherhood of man,¹⁰⁰ he wrote about the inferior moral and mental status of the Japanese in a footnote in his book, *American Destiny*. Davies stated that as a result of badly impeded development and the virus of mental and moral anarchy (to which they put up little resistance), the mind of the Japanese people was feudal and semi-barbaric.¹⁰¹

VI. The impact of Davies' theology on his practice of ministry

As a result of his theological beliefs, Davies changed worship, institutional policy, and congregational life at All Souls in a number of ways. Upon his arrival, Davies immediately instituted innovations in worship, including the elimination of the communion service and the use of selections from non-Biblical writers as Scripture Readings.¹⁰² Davies did not believe in creeds and valued the writings of all major religions. Furthermore, All Souls formed a new organization consistent with Davies' belief in faith in action. In January of 1946, The Washington Chapter of the Unitarian Fellowship for Social Justice was formed to enable congregants concerned with social problems to meet for information, discussion, and action.¹⁰³

Davies also addressed institutional policies of the church that ran counter to his beliefs of equality. Beginning in 1937, All Souls Church housed the Metropolitan Boys Club No.10 free of charge. The Boys Club provided recreational services in the

⁹⁸ Schulz, 116.

⁹⁹ Schulz, 109.

¹⁰⁰ Davies, A. Powell. "Unitarianism – What is it?" Sermon. P.5.

¹⁰¹ Davies, A. Powell. *American Destiny: A Faith for America*. Beacon Press; Boston, 1942. P.35.

¹⁰² Staples, 114-115.

¹⁰³ Staples, 116.

neighborhood and served an average of 400 boys each day. The club, however, restricted access, and this greatly disturbed Davies. In 1949, after significant encouragement from Davies, the Church Trustees told the Boys Club Board of Directors that a policy change opening the No.10 Club to all boys would be welcomed. The Boys Club Board of Directors replied that the time was not right for such an action. In 1954, the Church Trustees again approached the Boys Club Board of Directors and asked when a change of policy might occur, and the Club immediately withdrew from the building. The absence of the Boys Club left a significant gap in services in the neighborhood, and Davies worked quickly with the Unitarian Service Committee to replace the previous Boys Club with the new, integrated Columbia Heights Boys Club.¹⁰⁴

Davies brought a radical political voice to the pulpit of All Souls. In a sermon entitled, "The Shelter of Good Intentions," Davies announced that he would be boycotting all racially segregated restaurants in the city and urged his congregants to join him. After the service, more than 40,000 copies of a list of racially segregated restaurants were distributed and the boycott spread.¹⁰⁵ Davies preached on controversial social, political, and international issues and was actively involved in community life. Davies' belief in the power of liberal religion also led him to engage in significant activity in the larger Unitarian denomination. He was appointed chairman of the AUA Committee on Unitarian Advancement and drafted an influential platform titled, "The Faith Behind Freedom."¹⁰⁶

According to Davies, America carried the only answer to the challenge of the modern world. "This is the answer of our heritage, the promise and fulfillment of our history; it is the American Revolution carried to completion; it is the commonwealth of human rights extended universally; it is the New World becoming the whole world."¹⁰⁷ He asserted that "Not by design, but by necessity, the American people are moving towards world ascendancy. It was inevitable always."¹⁰⁸ To further clarify this point,

¹⁰⁴ Staples, 112-113.

¹⁰⁵ Staples, 112.

¹⁰⁶ Staples, 105. In this platform, Davies wrote, "The world is now too small for anything but brotherhood, and brotherhood, before it can be universal, must be based upon the principle that all men are created free...Freedom grows from free religion; only a free religion can be universal, and every other freedom is based on freedom of the mind."

¹⁰⁷ Davies, A. Powell. *American Destiny: A Faith for America*. Beacon Press; Boston, 1942. P.21-22.

¹⁰⁸ Davies, A. Powell. *American Destiny: A Faith for America*. Beacon Press; Boston, 1942. P.7.

Davies continued, "America will achieve, not imperial domination but *international ascendancy*... American opportunity will not be perpetual nor American ascendancy eternal...the future...will not reconstruct a 'white man's world.' It will be an inter-racial, international world in which America will be ascendant."¹⁰⁹

Davies belief in the saving message of the "American" ideals of freedom, equality, and the brotherhood of man urged him to act in many ways. He was a radical voice for racial equality in Washington, led several successful overseas relief campaigns, and frequently challenged politicians to live up to the ideals of the Constitution. He spoke publicly and wrote prolifically about the importance of faith in action and encouraged his congregants to do something. He argued against communism, believing that it was a threat to freedom and equality. As addressed earlier, however, Davies also acted in opposition to his belief in the brotherhood of man by encouraging active prosecution and discrimination against people who were identified with communism.

VII. Conclusion

A. Powell Davies consistently spoke and acted on his beliefs, amassed an impressive record working for social action, and was an influential public presence in the local, national, and international community. Davies lived his theology and made an appreciable difference in the lives of many in the Washington area. In a historical moment when America had successfully emerged from World War II and entered into a cold war with the Soviet Union, Davies spoke of intensely patriotic American ideals. Davies' ideals of individual responsibility, equality, and democracy, have endured within the UU movement, and they exist today as a part of the current Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes. If Unitarian Universalist theology is an individual search for truth and meaning that recognizes the value of all individuals, the diversity of relevant spiritual beliefs, and emphasizes the practical results of personal beliefs, then A. Powell Davies' work provides one example of a Unitarian theology that fits well in the context of Unitarian Universalism.

¹⁰⁹ Davies, A. Powell. *American Destiny: A Faith for America*. Beacon Press; Boston, 1942. P.10.